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THE RELIGIOUS QUEST OF THEODORE ROETHKE

The University of Oklahoma

PH.D.

1980

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THE RELIGIOUS QUEST OF THEODORE ROETHKE

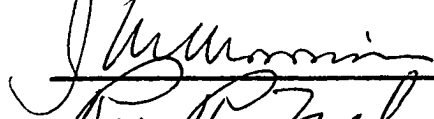
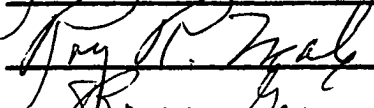
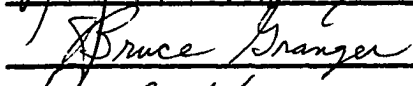
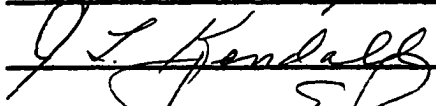
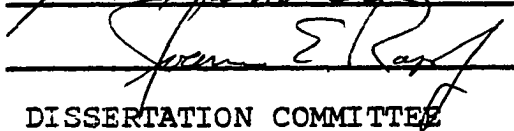
A DISSERTATION
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degree of
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BY
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Norman, Oklahoma

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THE RELIGIOUS QUEST OF THEODORE ROETHKE

APPROVED BY

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

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THE RELIGIOUS QUEST OF THEODORE ROETHKE

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Religion: The sequel (not secret) to art and love," Roethke wrote in one of his notebooks sometime between March and November of 1945.¹ It is an important statement about the way religion is linked to art and love, a connection Roethke clearly and increasingly makes in his poetry from this time on. Religion is one of the inevitable encounters of every great poet in his search for Truth, his necessary grappling with Life. As Roethke says:

I take it that we are faced with at least four principal themes: (1) The multiplicity, the chaos of modern life; (2) The way, the means of establishing a personal identity, a self in the face of that chaos; (3) The nature of creation, that faculty for producing order out of disorder in the arts, particularly in poetry; and (4) The nature of God Himself.²

Roethke's search led him to study mysticism, to return to his childhood, to explore his ancestors (blood, archetypal, and literary), and to concentrate on the more elementary forms of life--animals, plants, stones--the subhuman. He also had numerous, often terrifying, encounters with madness. Each of these things contributed to the growth, vision, and original-

ity of Roethke the man and Roethke the poet.

Roethke's notebooks suggest that he was reading about mysticism in the mid-thirties; more particularly, he was studying Evelyn Underhill's Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness (1911).

Roethke took copious notes from his reading, especially on Chapters IV and V of Part One, "The Characteristics of Mysticism" and "Mysticism and Theology," and Chapter IV of Part Two, "The Illumination of the Self."³ Underhill's book is central to Roethke's view of mysticism and the resulting influence mysticism had on his life, thought, and poetry. It is, therefore, worthwhile to look at some of the tenets of mysticism as put forth by Underhill and adopted (although some were later rejected) by Roethke.

The mystic, she tells us, is an anti-intellectual who moves through the sense world to the spiritual world to ultimate Reality.⁴ Mystics hold "always the same Beatific Vision of a Goodness, Truth, and Beauty which is one."⁵ Surely, this is Roethke's intended perspective as a poet. In Open House (1941), Roethke's first volume, most of the poems indicate a rejection of possessions, including the body, to get at the spirit, as in "Open House": "I'm naked to the bone, / With nakedness my shield. / Myself is what I wear: / I keep the spirit spare."⁶ In The Lost Son sequence (The Lost Son and Other Poems, 1948) and Praise to the End! (1951) Roethke turns to the sense world of the child; in the greenhouse poems of

the former volume and poems and parts of poems thereafter he turns to the sense world of the subhuman; in Words for the Wind (1958) he enters the sense world of the lover; and in The Far Field (1964) his poetry unites the sense and spiritual worlds in what for Roethke is ultimate Reality--the oneness of all creation through the power of love.

Underhill says that the mystic's language is often symbolic and usually couched in terms of love, for mysticism is based on love: "Mystic Love is a total dedication of the will; the deep-seated desire and tendency of the soul towards its source."⁷ Moreover, "The mystic's outlook, indeed, is the lover's outlook. It has the same element of wildness, the same quality of selfless and quixotic devotion, the same combination of rapture and humility."⁸ I will examine the love between the self and the world and the self (soul) and God in detail in Chapters 3 and 4, but for now, suffice it to say that Roethke's poetry is dominated, if not by the lover's outlook, by an outlook of love and awe.

The mystical way, according to Underhill, involves five steps: Awakening, Purgation, Illumination, the Dark Night of the Soul, and Union. These steps show that in order to ascend to ultimate union with God, one must first descend. The way up is the way down, or as Roethke put it:

I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound to be a succession of experiences, similar yet dissimilar. There is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going-forward; but there is some "progress." (SP, 39)

Hence, we see in Roethke's poetry that he goes back to his childhood, back to the greenhouse ("my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth" [SP, 39]) of his father, and he descends and communes with the subhuman, an idea that he might have got from Meister Eckhart.

Eckhart is mentioned several times in Roethke's notebooks. Roethke was probably introduced to Eckhart through Underhill, who discusses the medieval Dominican at length, particularly as a mystic of Immanence, as opposed to Emanation. Immanence she says is "apt to degenerate into pantheism; and into those extravagant perversions of the doctrine of 'deification' in which the mystic holds his transfigured self to be identical with the indwelling God."⁹ She goes on to quote Eckhart as saying, "God is nearer to me than I am to myself; he is just as near to wood and stone, but they do not know it."¹⁰ Roethke comes close to being a pantheist himself, and surely "his transfigured self" in many of his poems is, or is at least an attempt to be, "identical with the indwelling God." This is part of Roethke's search for identity, for self-understanding. "The human problem is to find out what one really is: whether one exists, whether existence is possible. But how?" (SP, 20) No doubt this is one of the reasons that mysticism attracted him. Sounding like Meister Eckhart in his reverence for all natural matter, Roethke tells us:

If the dead can come to our aid in a quest for identity, so can the living--and I mean all living things, including the sub-human. This is not so much a naive as a primitive attitude: animistic,

maybe. Why not? Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life. (SP, 24)

Roethke echoes Eckhart in another way as well. According to Raymond Blakney in Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation (1941), Eckhart perceived man's relationship to God--a flesh and blood relationship--in sexual terms:

. . . he works out this "blood relationship" to God by means of the analogy of the sexual relationship in marriage. . . . He illustrates his own oft-avowed law that whatever a man gives up for God's sake he finds again in God a hundredfold. Having given up marriage in the flesh for God's sake, Eckhart finds it again everywhere in God's dealings with himself and mankind. God is a procreator, a begetter, and thus the Father. The Soul is the virgin wife, in whom the Son is begotten, and this is the secret of God's eternal delight and man's¹¹ too. . . . God is the tireless lover of the soul.

Roethke's relationship to God is by no means simple, but his is a very sexual poetry ("On long poems in 'Lost Son'--'the most phallic poems in English,'" he notes at the foot of a letter¹²), and I think he is combining Eckhart's view of the Soul's relationship to God, as well as the organic view of Whitman, with the recognition of coming to terms with one's own sexuality as he explores creation, human and subhuman, ferreting out answers to the questions of identity of self, man, and Maker. As Rosemary Sullivan reiterates, Roethke's was not an orthodox mysticism: "He wanted instead," and she quotes from the notebooks, "a 'rampant, triumphant, fleshly mysticism, the full spasm of the human, not simply beauty and darkness.'"¹³ Indeed, he notes that "The flesh should be rejoiced in, not mocked, defiled, or mortified. It's here that

I must depart from Christianity."¹⁴ This was not Roethke's view as a young poet. "But," he writes, "the young often do have an acute sense of defilement, a hatred of the body" (SP, 22). The majority of Roethke's poetry, like his mysticism, is earthy, fleshly, often vibrant always vital, and energized with love.

But what of his God? Like his mysticism, Roethke's God is unorthodox and ambiguous:

I believe that man should find out God in his own terms. This is nothing more or less than Protestantism: prove it on my pulse, bring me to Thee. I confront thee directly, or not at all. If you're father, father away. This does not, I repeat, make me superior, but I'm damned if I'm inferior to those who fall back on an accepted, arranged order of things, a complete theology with all the answers. (Box 28, folder 26)

I will discuss Roethke's God at greater length when I discuss oneness in Chapter 4, but it is important now to emphasize Roethke's belief in God. "There are two assumptions rampant: that we have lost God: indeed lost him for the 19th C.; or we are far from him. Neither do I believe" (Box 28, folder 26). A few pages later, however, he does have the following statement circled: "But perhaps those times of being closer to God are shorter in our time" (Box 28, folder 26). He elaborates upon this point in his essay "On 'Identity'":

For there is a God, and He's here, immediate, accessible. I don't hold with those thinkers that believe in this time He is farther away--that in the Middle Ages, for instance, He was closer. He is equally accessible now, not only in works of art or in the glories of a particular religious service, or in the light, the aftermath that follows the dark night of the soul, but in the lowest forms of life,

He moves and has His being. Nobody has killed off the snails. Is this a new thought? Hardly. But it needs some practicing in Western society. Could Reinhold Neibuhr love a worm? I doubt it. But I--we--can. (SP, 27)

Roethke refuses to be restricted by commonly held views concerning mysticism, God, poetry, or anything else. If his poetry seems peculiar and intense, it is because he has not allowed his vision to become impaired by the omnipresent bombardment of modern order, "a violent order" (Box 28, folder 26) as he shows us in "Dolor":

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper-weight,
All the misery of manilla folders and mucilage,
.
Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma,
Endless duplication of lives and objects.
And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,
.
Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,
Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate gray standard faces.
(CP, 46)

Roethke comments: "This poem is an exposition of one of the modern hells: the institution that overwhelms the individual man. The 'order,' the trivia of the institution, is, in human terms, a disorder, and as such, must be resisted" (SP, 20). Individuality, uniqueness, separateness (yet, paradoxically, oneness) is one of Roethke's foremost beliefs:

Sadly, we cannot honestly proclaim:
I could watch! I could watch!
I saw the separateness of all things!
But why can't you? Are you already so conditioned by multigraph, paper-clip, comma, by the inert and ailing matter, by the rubbish that our economy, dedicated to waste, throws up, that you can't go out in the front yard and look at things? I don't mean organized hiking, bird-watching, obviously. I mean looking at a tree, at a flower, at an animal in or

out of the zoo as if you are seeing it for the first time. To know is to love, in this realm Rilke spent eight hours, was it, looking at a tiger. Ted Hughes, the young English poet whose animal poems are a new thing, sometimes a glory, knows some animals in the London Zoo better than his friends. (Box 28, folder 26)

According to Roethke, "We [Americans] surround ourselves with junk, ugly objects repeated endlessly, and then wonder why we're so far from any satisfying reality--" (Box 28, folder 26). And, he asserts, there is

a real hunger for a reality more than the immediate: a desire not only for a finality, for a consciousness beyond the mundane, but a desire for quietude, a desire for joy. Now this desire is what the drunkard, the saint, the mystic hankers for in varying ways:-- a purity, a final innocence--the phrase is Mr. Spender's. I think we Americans are very wistful about it. (SP, 19)

How do we go about discovering such a reality, "a final innocence," joy? One might answer that we need "to broaden our perspectives." Roethke counters:

It seems to me that a vertical rather than a horizontal verb is needed here: "to deepen our perspectives" is more to the point, at this point. With around the planet television, with young people in the Peace Corps, jumping from the local Y.M.C.A. into darkest Africa, and so on, I'm fearful of some of our global perspectives; but I'm fond [of] my back yard, and sometimes the front doesn't bother me. (Box 28, folder 26)

Like the mystic, Roethke turns to the self. This is where reality begins. While self-exploration--self-awakening--sounds simple enough, it is very complex; it involves the body, mind, unconscious, soul; and personal identity can remain elusive--one wears many masks.

So, it is not enough to focus solely on the self. The

drunkard, the saint, the mystic, the wistful American share, according to Roethke, "an intense desire to transform experience into something else" (Box 28, folder 26), something other. Belief in otherness is germane to Roethke's poetic vision. His poetry is a testament to the transformation of the self into the things beheld. This transformation is a conscious willing of self into object or animal, into otherness:

It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being--and in some instances, even an inanimate thing--brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe. Both feelings are not always present, I'm aware, but either can be an occasion for gratitude. And both can be induced. The first simply by intensity in the seeing. To look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you--Rilke gazing at his tiger for eight hours, for instance. If you can effect this, then you are by way of getting somewhere: knowing you will break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise, or maybe even to Thee. (SP, 25)

It was, perhaps, this very kind of intensity, this psychic and willful transformation of the self into something other that brought on Roethke's first bout with madness, a disease that plagued him throughout his adult life, but which may, as well, have contributed to his poetic genius. It occurred in November of 1935; Roethke was teaching at Michigan State University. He wrote the following account of his initial attack in a letter to his girlfriend at the time, Mary Kunkel:

I took a long hot bath to take the chill out. Then the next morning I decided to cut my eight o'clock class deliberately just to see how long they would stick around, then go to see the Dean to ex-

plain one or two things about this experiment. (He hadn't asked to see me.) Well, I decided to take a little walk in the country again without a coat before doing so. It was damp and quite cold, and I got so chilled and so frightened that when I finally reached the Dean's office, I was a mess. I was so cold and chilled and frightened that I was delirious, I suppose, although they didn't have sense enough to realize it. They finally called the ambulance and a doctor who led me to the damned car, just groggy as hell. Well, about two hours later, I woke up in the hospital, very conscious and lively, determined to get out immediately. I wasn't sure just what the hell I'd done or said in the Dean's office but I didn't care. I wanted to quit anyway, finish Pa Crouse's work, and get a better job. Well, finally the hospital got in Pete De Vries from the department, whom I trusted, who convinced me that the thing to do was to stay in the hospital a while and take orders from him and the doctors.¹⁵

Roethke transferred to Mercywood Sanitarium near Ann Arbor, where he stayed until January 17th.¹⁶ According to Allan Seager, "after he had married he told his wife that this first episode had been self-induced 'to reach a new level of reality.'" ¹⁷ Roethke himself told Seager nine years after the incident that,

For no reason I started to feel very good. Suddenly I knew how to enter into the life of everything around me. I knew how it felt to be a tree, a blade of grass, even a rabbit. I didn't sleep much. I just walked around with this wonderful feeling.¹⁸

Seager, as well as Peter De Vries (not the novelist) and John Clark, friends and fellow English professors at Michigan State, believed that Roethke probably did induce his manic episode. Whether or not this was the case, Roethke came to realize that "there is always a price and sometimes a terrible one in human terms, for another reality" (Box 28, folder 26).

Among Roethke's literary manuscripts are several pages

of notes on madness. The material is important for numerous reasons: it clarifies Roethke's position on madness; it relates madness to mysticism; it relates madness to art; and it explains, in part at least, why Roethke turned away from the last two steps of the mystic quest--the Dark Night of the Soul and Ultimate Union--and chose instead to stay in the world of the senses, to pursue mysticism only as far as Illumination.

In the back of a notebook dated "12 Aug. 1945" but re-dated "Fall, Winter 1944" by Allan Seager, Roethke wrote:

I'm in the pits, still in the mire, spiritually. I can't seem to throw off the sensuality that is so much a part of me. I don't want to throw it off. I'm not tempted: I'm the tempter. Maybe I'm of the party of the Devil. One of his seducing fat angels. (Box 35, notebook 65)

He mentions "the cuttings pieces" in a letter to William Carlos Williams written around this same time (SL, 112), and a later statement about the poems in The Lost Son and Other Poems--"Some of these pieces, then, begin in the mire; as if man is no more than a shape writhing from the old rock" (SP, 40)--suggests that most likely he was working on these poems at the time, and was becoming frustrated and depressed, as he indicates in another notebook evidently written in 1945 and mis-dated:

March 14 '44

The new resolutions: I will take walks, start a new notebook, work with my hands.

What am I worrying about?

Why do I hunt for something to hate, for something to annoy me?

How terrible the need for God.

The paradox of destruction: I can no longer be good--I am bored with the moral course, yet anything otherwise produces anxiety. (Box 35, notebook 68)

The tension and the struggle here are obvious. Still, Roethke's second bout with mental illness was not expected, even though it may, like the first, have been induced. On the following page in the same notebook he wrote these fragments: "The state of wanting to kill everything one loves: cut off more than the nose to spite the ~~face~~ race"; and "To wish for an illness--for something to come to grips with a break from reality" (Box 35, notebook 68). He had been mentally stable for ten years, but he was admitted to Albany General Hospital shortly after Christmas, 1945.¹⁹

In The Glass House Roethke's biographer Allan Seager gives quite a fascinating account of Roethke's illness, which was diagnosed as manic-depression:

Since, in Ted's individual case, there were obvious strains and pressures, both inner and outer, that preceded the later episodes, it may well be that these stimulated the biological changes that sent him into his manic states. The signs were obvious. It was as if a change in his metabolism occurred and his whole life moved to a more intense level, psychically and physiologically. He became increasingly excited, simultaneously cheerful and alarmed, eager to talk and talking incessantly, and full of extravagant projects. He indulged in eccentricities of dress like wearing three pairs of trousers at once, rubbers when it was not raining, sandals in the snow, and he had an old unblocked Borsalino hat with a wide brim he wore at such times. He would make dozens of phone calls to friends all over the country or even abroad--he liked to think himself rich during these times, rich and powerful. He slept little. In Seattle when he was persuaded to go to a hospital, he regarded himself as terribly strong, a kind of Superman, and once said to the attendants on entry, "You'd better tie me down, give me a mouth gag--I took on five docs at the last place."²⁰

This demonstrates the dramatic changes Roethke underwent dur-

ing his manic phases. He was evidently much more manic than depressive: "Ted always said, 'I'm at my best when I'm slightly depressed,' but his depressed periods were brief and shallow and seem to have been caused by exhaustion as much as anything else."²¹ And in spite of his recurring illness, "he did not stop writing. He worked continually and many of his poems were written in hospitals."²² The comments of two psychiatrists who treated Roethke are most interesting. Dr. William Hoffer, "a highly cultivated man, a pupil of Freud's, . . . [who] was greatly impressed by Ted both as a man and by his poetry," told Seager: "I think his troubles were merely the running expenses he paid for being his kind of poet."²³ "And the first psychiatrist who ever treated him, Dr. Theophil Klingman of Mercywood Sanitarium said, 'You can't cure a personality.'"²⁴ "But," Seager hastens to add, "all these conjectures may be false. The source may have lain in the chemistries of his blood and nerves."²⁵ Seager concludes:

Whatever the causes, he did not stop working when he was ill. His friends, his doctors, and his notebooks all attest to this. Well or ill, he wrote poetry or took notes for poetry nearly every day of his adult life. Poetry was the central fact of his life, and everything else, his states of mind, his friendships, enmities, his loves and hatreds, even his amusements, clung to it like filings to a magnet.²⁶

No one is sure what the effects of Roethke's manic-depression were on his poetry. In "Heard in a Violent Ward" he claims fraternity "With the likes of Blake, / And Christopher Smart, / And that sweet man, John Clare" (CP, 228). But

Roethke did not really think of himself as a mad poet or some sort of prophet of the unconscious: "In this matter of my accessibility to the unconscious--that's one instance of not believing in my press notices" (Box 28, folder 26). Roethke was clearly ambivalent about "breaking from reality," about mania and madness. He believed that it did alter reality and experience, and this could be good: "It is true that in some cases of mania, the subject experiences a sense of the one-ness of all things. What the Muslims called expansion, what Jung called 'positive inflation'" (Box 28, folder 26). And he wrote, "The mad are the last of the holy" (Box 28, folder 26). But he was terrified of madness and did not see it as a game: "Anything, but anything, done for kicks is likely to have a back-kick. And I don't mean guilt" (Box 28, folder 26). His numerous manic bouts and the long periods in hospitals were traumatic, ravaging: "If time is a terror, the loss of it is something worse--that the madman can testify from the lonely vigil. And it would seem it frightens even the mystic. The long night without sleep when suddenly it is six o'clock in the morning, and you know that the loss of sleep is dangerous" (Box 28, folder 26).

Roethke was fearful that madness was looked on too lightly, even desired, and he wrote about this at length, clarifying his thoughts and cautioning others:

The madman has become a kind of cultural hero to some of the fierce young. Thus, Peter Viereck I heard being wistful about that unblessed state. I said, Peter it's not nice work, and you wouldn't

like it. And Peter, mind you, has that summa cum laude Harvard mind; he has written some poems, he was a real hero to the Italians, still is. Now why? Granted it may take spiritual guts to deliberately shake up, to disarrange the senses--and it can be done: by noise, by repeated music, by refusing sleep, and so on. Rimbaud is not the only one who's done this. There's a terrific sense of exhilaration and terror on going down: The feeling of I'm doing what very few (relatively) have been able to do. But the unconscious is not neutral, Zaehner and them, to the contrary. Nor is nature. Therein dwelleth the devil, and what is called original sin, all the seamy sides of man. Ask these forces to take over, and they may. You may be possessed of a terrible and terrifying energy: your adrenalin may leap like an animal's. Your acceleration down may get entirely out of control. There is always the factor that you haven't counted on. The profound desire to live to the fullest may suddenly change into an even more powerful will to die: to charge straight at a window, for instance. What can bring you back? Only I am convinced, love, and the

The last statement is completed below; here after a short space he wrote:

That's what can happen if the animal charge takes over. You may take over the attributes of the prideful lion; but if on the next night you descend to the snake, the serpent,--if the hallucinations become the sole reality--then you're in a fix. What can bring you back.

On another page he concluded:

At that point Wordsworth's wise passiveness will do very little good. What will bring you back is love, love in its final sense, and the work that springs out of love: not only for all living things, but for the stones themselves; for what has been done in spite of history. (Box 28, folder 26)

Roethke's terror at the exchange of reality and identity is obvious. His linking of madness--no longer considered holy but now "that unblessed state"--with the devil, the serpent,

and original sin reveals the inherent evil he sees there, the powerful temptation, the engulfing pit. He added: "The irrational should be respected, but like nature itself it must be watched. 'The Devil isn't dead, he's just away.' But in such moments he can call on you all too suddenly. If He isn't there, the abyss is" (Box 28, folder 26).

It is easy to understand, then, why Roethke could not accept the mystical steps of the Dark Night of the Soul--the abyss--and Union--the mortification of the flesh. These became for him steps of terror and blindness rather than creativity and vision: "The loss of the time sense, so exciting at first, can become entirely terrifying if it continues: dawn itself can become a horror"; and "The repetitiveness of the experience, the sameness that comes with obsession" (Box 28, folder 26). In fact, he concludes that the poetry of a madman is not even very good:

It is a material other than what meets the immediate eye, or the inner eye as it usually functions. But I would insist that very rarely does he make something of the experience immediately: Whenever I've tried it, the results are invariably excessively repetitive, obsessional in a boring way. If you want a poem written out of madness, written in a madhouse, I can give you one. (Box 28, folder 26)

Indeed, in much of Roethke's poetry there is an element of

wildness, of plunging into the depths of darkness--"I think the manic artist, the poet whose personality swings are wide can become fascinated with this dark of the unconscious" (Box 28, folder 26)--but there is more a sense of revelation. As Alexander Hutchison maintains, "illumination is the best term to describe the ultimate experience in these poems: the perception of identity in 'something wholly other.'"²⁷

As a poet and a religious man--"Take a crude definition of a religious man: that he believes in an Other, a power greater than himself" (Box 28, folder 26)--Roethke's desire to understand himself and life, the nature of creation and the Creator, and to translate this understanding into poetry, into artistic experience, brought him to study mysticism, which in turn focussed his attention on the self and the soul and the unconscious, and, further, on other entities, animate and inanimate, until through his intense identification with otherness he came to a feeling of oneness, of belongingness, if you will, and totality. His religious quest, finally, is a grand achievement. Roethke's poetry, for all its writhing in the mire and slime and groping in the unconscious, is foremost the evolving of a consciousness and ultimately reflects a real yearning for life. His poems have a real sense of joy, a real sense of love.²⁸

CHAPTER 2

AWAKENING THE UNCONSCIOUS SELF

Just four years after the publication of his first volume, Open House (1941), Roethke recognized what critics and readers alike have conceded, that for the most part the poems are stiff, patterned pieces: "My first book was much too wary, much too gingerly in its approach to experience; rather dry in tone and constricted in rhythm" (SL, 114). Ten years later, in 1955, Roethke's evaluation of his uneven beginnings was little changed: "It took me ten years to complete one little book, and now some of the things in it seem to creak. Still, I like about ten pieces in it" (SP, 16).¹ Though the majority of the poems in Open House are rigid in form and serious if not severe in tone--"those neat-and-tidy or grunt-and-groan effects" (SL, 143)--they mark the poet's beginnings, indicate an inchoate mysticism, and hint at the direction Roethke would take in later volumes. Many of these poems are attempts to strip to the core, to the spirit, to get at certain truths, even though Roethke tells us in "Open House" "My truths are all foreknown, / Myself is what I wear: / I keep the spirit spare" (CP, 3). At this time

Roethke really did not know the self that he wore or what the spirit was, as he tells us in his essay "On 'Identity'" (1963):

I was going through, though I didn't realize it at the time, a stage that all contemplative men must go through. This poem is a clumsy, innocent, desperate asseveration. I am not speaking of the empirical self, the flesh-bound ego; it's a single word: myself, the aggregate of the several selves, if you will. The spirit or soul--should we say the self, once perceived, becomes the soul?--this I was keeping "spare" in my desire for the essential. But the spirit need not be spare: it can grow gracefully and beautifully like a tendril, like a flower. I did not know this at the time. (SP, 21)

As with "Open House," ironically, the views Roethke held in a number of these early poems were later rejected.

The small, formal "'Long Live the Weeds'" is interesting for several reasons. While the protagonist hails the weeds, bitter rock, and barren soil, he does so sardonically, though not insincerely. And, "My narrow vegetable realm!" and the weeds, rock, and soil--"All things unholy, marred by curse, / The ugly of the universe" (CP, 18)--are the very things that Roethke came to consider holy and central to his identity. Similarly, in later poems rather than match wits with "The rough, the wicked, and the wild," Roethke's protagonist becomes them. But, even in this early poem we see Roethke's incipient awareness of the world of the small, the overlooked, the abhorred, the world that surrounded him and that his poetry came to inhabit. As he realizes here, "These shape the creature that is I."

From his despicable "narrow vegetable realm!" Roethke turned to his imprisoning flesh in "Epidermal Macabre." "I

hate my epidermal dress," cries the protagonist about "The garment neither fur nor hair, / The cloak of evil and despair" (CP, 19). Here again is an attitude that Roethke later discarded. He came to love the flesh and revel in the senses.

A third poem from this volume, "The Auction," once more reveals Roethke's need to rid himself of attachments that smother his spirit:

Once on returning home, purse-proud and hale,
I found my choice possessions on the lawn.
An auctioneer was whipping up a sale.
I did not move to claim what was my own.

.

My spirits rose each time the hammer fell,
The heart beat faster as the fat words rolled.
I left my home with unencumbered will
And all the rubbish of confusion sold. .
(CP, 21)

Each of these poems demonstrates Roethke's desire to wrest the spiritual self from the physical world, rather than immerse the aggregate self in the worlds of mind and matter as he does in his next volume. Still, these and other poems in Open House established early on Roethke's gnawing and insistent search for identity, a search, a "problem," which he tells us "comes early, comes sudden" (Box 28, folder 26):

Personal identity:

This one plagues the young [particularly the neurotic young: they have a sharp sharp sense of what's phoney]: Do I exist? Is existence possible--two different things, it is true. But right away, it seems to me that creativity--particularly the writing of verse, can come to his aid, it is the shortest way in to a finality, except perhaps the profound religious conversion. Or a really great love-- . . . (Box 28, folder 26)

Roethke certainly used verse as a means of confronting the question of existence and the problem of identity, beginning most notably in his second volume, The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948). The greenhouse poems and The Lost Son sequence brought Roethke into his own as a poet.² These poems are startlingly original, revealing a vision and confidence heretofore unseen in his work. The verse forms are looser and more varied, the subjects more personal, the poetry more forceful, jarringly memorable. Roethke's response to "Do I exist?" is almost an assault on life--his, ours, and its (the subhuman)--and his poetry demonstrates that "from Do I exist to 'Should I exist' is often a short jump" (Box 28, folder 26). These poems reflect as well Roethke's pursuant study of mysticism, particularly the steps of awakening and purgation which lead to the state of mystical illumination, and his successive bouts with madness.

While the greenhouse poems are about the awakening consciousness of self, they are more concerned with the consciousness of self and other, so I will discuss them in the next chapter. Before examining The Lost Son and subsequent sequences, we need to look at a few of the short pieces in this volume that provide glimpses of the territory Roethke explored persistently, especially in the sequences, throughout his life.

"Night Crow," for example, is clearly about the dark distances of the mind--"Deep in the brain, far back" (CP, 49)

--the unconscious. With its "moonless black" and mysterious depths, the unconscious is surely the haunt of all identity seekers; it is in Jung's words, which Roethke quotes in his notes, the "hinterland of man's mind," and "it arises from timeless depths; it is foreign [and] cold, many-sided, demonic & grotesque" (Box 65, folder 13).³

"Timeless depths" are also the focus of "River Incident" and "The Cycle," poems about primeval roots, poems that share a journey back in time and space, a return to the past and a compression of the past in the present--"And I knew I had been there before" ("River Incident," CP, 49). In both poems, as well, natural elements are the transmitters, the connectors of the past and the present: "A shell arched under my toes" and "Sea water stood in my veins" ("River Incident"); "The full rain fell straight down, / . . . Under primeval stone" ("The Cycle," CP, 50). There is a distinct sense of oneness and timelessness in these poems; and even though the self is not mentioned in "The Cycle," the path of the "Dark water, underground, / Beneath the rock and clay, / Beneath the roots of trees," as we shall see more clearly later, is a journey into the unconscious. Both poems, then, are attempts to discover the self and to recover its place in the scheme of things.

While the depths of the unconscious are most familiarly Jungian and Freudian territory, and Roethke's poetry invites analysis along these lines, his focus is less deliber-

ately psychological than mystical. In February, 1963, Roethke made the following response to an enquiry "about the influence of Freud's writings or ideas":

I can honestly say I have read very little Freud, not even the basic writings. On the other hand, some of my fancy friends went through analysis with some of the Viennese people and I dare say I picked up some notions from their babbling about their therapy. . . .

I have read part of Jung's Modern Man in Search of a Soul, but again rather recently. (SL, 260)

But Stanley Kunitz tells us in "Roethke: Poet of Transformations" that Roethke was indeed influenced by Maud Bodkin's notably Jungian Archetypal Patterns in Poetry.⁴ Still, he was more influenced by Evelyn Underhill's Mysticism, and it is in his adherence to the mystical process of discovery and self-discovery, the undulating motion of mystical steps as one rocks forward and backward and forward again, groping for and edging toward mergence with God, that he turns to the self and further to the child, looking to beginnings. So he perceives the Lost Son. But he also knows that he needs greater freedom poetically, that, like Whitman, he cannot constrain his poetic vision in tight, neat forms. Thus, in a letter to Kenneth Burke, December 21, 1945, when he was working on The Lost Son, Roethke wrote:

My whole effort of late has been to write a lively understandable poetry that a good many people can read with enjoyment without having their intelligence or sensibility insulted. . . . I am trying to loosen up, to write poems of greater intensity and symbolical depth. (SL, 114)

Roethke was at Bennington College where he was, according to

James Turner Jackson, a close friend and fellow English professor, talking about and working on the long poem: "Meaning by this, as I finally came to see, not the long poem as any particular verse-form, past, present, or future, but as entry into the poet's whole lifelong expression (segmented, of course, for certain practical as well as aesthetic reasons)."⁵

Mysticism, too, was for Roethke an entry into the poet's whole lifelong expression. The journey and discovery motif so central to the search for self-identity is equally suited to, and a popular symbol in, mystical thought and writings. Mysticism is, after all, a transcendent movement from the sense world to the spiritual world. The mystic is the pilgrim, the wanderer, the traveller seeking Ultimate Reality.⁶ Roethke, then, saw in the long poem and the mystical journey the seminal metaphors for his particular poetic expression and vision, for the struggle of understanding, of self-identity, and, imminently, of spirituality.

Before looking at the long poems we need to clarify the nature of the Mystical Way, the mystical steps, in order to recognize how and when Roethke is drawing on this valuable source. Evelyn Underhill defines the steps as follows. The first step is "The awakening of the Self to consciousness of Divine Reality. This experience, usually abrupt and well-marked, is accompanied by intense feelings of joy and exaltation."⁷ The second step is more complicated:

The Self, aware for the first time of Divine Beauty, realizes by contrast its own finiteness and imper-

fection, the manifold illusions in which it is immersed, the immense distance which separates it from the One. Its attempts to eliminate by discipline and mortification all that stands in the way of its progress towards union with⁸ God constitute Purgation: a state of pain and effort.

An understanding of the third step, illumination, is essential to an understanding of Roethke's purpose in the long poems. This step is complex, embracing many of the metaphors and intents found in Roethke's poetry. Therefore, I quote Underhill at some length:

When by Purgation the Self has become detached from the "things of sense," and acquired those virtues which are the "ornaments of the spiritual marriage," its joyful consciousness of the Transcendent Order returns in an enhanced form. Like the prisoners in Plato's "Cave of Illusion," it has awakened to knowledge of Reality, has struggled up the harsh and difficult path to the mouth of the cave. Now it looks upon the sun. This is Illumination: a state which includes in itself many of the stages of contemplation, "degrees of orisons," visions and adventures of the soul described by St. Teresa and other mystical writers. These form, as it were, a way within the Way . . . whilst the Way proper represents organic growth. Illumination is the "contemplative state" par excellence. It forms, with the two preceding states, the "first mystic life." Many mystics never go beyond it; and, on the other hand, many seers and artists not usually classed amongst them, have shared to some extent, the experiences of the illuminated state. Illumination brings a certain apprehension of the Absolute, a sense of Divine Presence: but not⁹ true union with it. It is a state of happiness.

Roethke, whether he is classed as a mystic or not, does not go beyond the "first mystic life," although there are times, as I will discuss later, when he tries to apprehend the final steps, the Dark Night of the Soul and Ultimate Union. It is not necessary to pursue these latter steps now. Illumination

is Roethke's aim, that state of enlightenment and happiness, and his long poems record his lifelong, active, urgent struggle out of the darkness into the light and the organic nature of his art, the growth of both poetry and poet.

The long poem or sequence is one of the hallmarks, as well as the form, of much of Roethke's greatest work. It lends itself to organic, cyclical poetry, the kind of poetry that for Roethke best expressed both the mystical outlook, with its progressive writhing toward illumination and ultimate union with God, and the way of natural truths--life itself is cyclical, seasonal, evolutionary, and knowledge is gained through repetition both of experience and teachings. As Roethke comments, "the poet can only arrive at the truth of his experience by a circuitous route, by an indirect use of language. Not a deadweight of disconnected memories" (Box 65, folder 13). While in essence all Roethke's poetry concerns the search for identity, because of the obvious parallels between the "circuitous route" to the truth and the cyclical nature of sequential poems, the sequences are the most apposite examples for a study of this search, and will, therefore, be the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

The Lost Son, Roethke's first sequence, a series of eight sectioned poems (four poems are in The Lost Son and Other Poems; three are in Praise to the End!; and one is in The Waking), is certainly circuitous and the language indirect as Roethke recaptures the experiences of the Lost Son.

Referring to these poems in "Open Letter," Roethke indicates the nature of their origin: "let's say you fish, patiently, in that dark pond, the unconscious, or dive in, with or without pants on, to come up festooned with dead cats, weeds, tin cans, and other fascinating debris--" (SP, 37). Some of the additional debris that Roethke's protagonist encounters in his dark plunge are papa, or father, "with all the ambiguities of father being operative" (Box 28, folder 26), sexuality, and Mother Goose. The former are not unexpected, especially in this Freudian-sensitized modern age, but the last is perhaps surprising and quite important, as well as being one of the delights of these poems, because in his attempt to recreate the child's world, to get inside the child's mind, Roethke risked his reputation as a serious poet. In "Open Letter" he discusses the challenge he faced:

Each of these poems presented its own series of problems. The earliest piece of all (in terms of the age of the protagonist) is written entirely from the viewpoint of a very small child: all interior drama; no comment; no interpretation. To keep the rhythms, the language "right," i.e. consistent with what a child would say or at least to create the "as if" of the child's world, was very difficult technically. I don't believe anyone else has been foolish enough to attempt a tragedy in this particular way. The rhythms are very slow; there is no cutesy prattle; it is not a suite in goo-goo. (SP, 41)

Roethke is not specific about the poems to which he is referring here, and there are a number of passages in both The Lost Son and The Praise to the End! Part II sequences that are quick-paced and seemingly nonsensical, but the poems are not

inconsequential babble.

Since the poems are a deliberate journey into the unconscious, and frequently into the unconscious of the child, Roethke recognized that there might be difficulty in understanding them. Again in "Open Letter," he offers this advice:

But believe me: you will have no trouble if you approach these poems as a child would, naively, with your whole being awake, your faculties loose and alert. (A large order, I daresay!) Listen to them, for they are written to be heard, with the themes often coming alternately, as in music, and usually a partial resolution at the end. Each poem . . . is complete in itself; yet each in a sense is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more. (SP, 37)

The poems are intended as an awakening for us too, and the last statement emphasizes Roethke's mystical inclination, each poem being "a slow spiritual progress"--awakening, purgation, and illumination--"to become something more."

Identity does not come easily, nor quickly. As Roethke shows in The Lost Son and other sequences, illumination is a slow, spiralling process. Hence, the poems in the sequences, and the sequences themselves, are reminiscent of one another, contain similar patterns and imagery, and are literally "spiral knowledge" ("Last Words," CP, 48):

This struggle for spiritual identity is, of course, one of the perpetual recurrences. (This is not the same as the fight of the adolescent personality for recognition in the "real" world.) Disassociation often precedes a new state of clarity. (SP, 41)

Perpetual recurrences and disassociation are common elements in the sequence poems, as they are common activities of the

mind, and as they signal growth, development, awareness--the connectedness of things.

The Lost Son's mind is disassociative and free associative as he explores its cavernous recesses seeking answers to his identity. He is every lost self and, more particularly, Roethke's lost self, a son who at fifteen lost his father, and for whom reconcilliation with that father and with The Father became a lifelong obsession. The self is not just a certain physical and mental creature. Though previously quoted, Roethke's definition bears repeating: "I am not speaking of the empirical self, the flesh-bound ego; it's a single word: myself, the aggregate of the several selves, if you will. The spirit or soul--should we say the self, once perceived becomes the soul?--" (SP, 21). And, "The true discovery of one's true self really means, I think, the discovery of one's soul" (Box 28, folder 26). So the self for Roethke is multiple--the body, the flesh-bound ego, the spirit, the soul--and this self is the core of the long poems, and much of the rest of the poetry as well.

The poems of The Lost Son sequence represent various stages of development and agitation in the life of the Lost Son which Roethke probes via the unconscious in order to come to some understanding of the plight of man and to find his own identity. Basically, these poems are a mystical and psychological soul-searching. Roethke begins with the child re-confronting the death of his father, then moving back further to

his own conception, then going forward and backward to various moments. Again, "One must go back to go forward." "And, by back," as Roethke explains in a letter to Kenneth Burke, assumed to be written about March, 1946, when Roethke was working on this sequence, "I mean down into the consciousness of the race itself not just the quandries of adolescence, damn it" (SL, 116). Slowly, cyclically, the *Lost Son* progresses toward illumination and rebirth. For the mystic, rebirth means "the eye is opened on Eternity; the self, abruptly made aware of Reality, comes forth from the cave of illusion like a child from the womb and begins to live upon the supersensual plane."¹⁰ So the *Lost Son* eventually emerges into an enlightened state.

The first four poems of The Lost Son sequence, published together in 1948, mark one cycle in the protagonist's life. "The Lost Son" concerns the death of his father; "The Long Alley" rekindles the stirrings of adolescent sexuality and associated guilt; "A Field of Light" presents awareness and love of the natural world; and "The Shape of the Fire" combines all of these.

"The Lost Son," the first poem of the sequence, is the only one with titled sections. "The Flight," the first section, is about terror, about fleeing the "real" world for the security of the womb/tomb. The poem opens in the tomb: "At Woodlawn I heard the dead cry: / . . . I shook the softening chalk of my bones" (CP, 53). The *Lost Son's* flight to the

grave is a union of sorts with his dead father, an effort to comprehend death and therein life. Certainly the grave is a metaphor for the unconscious, that dark, scary welter of the unknown but not unknowable. There the Lost Son "Fished in an old wound, / The soft pond of repose." The pond, of course, is a metaphor for the unconscious as well as the womb, and fish are sperm. This effective duality seams together the unconscious and rebirth.

The terrified, confused, displaced Lost Son seems very like Alice in Wonderland:

Tell me:
Which is the way I take;
Out of what door do I go,
Where and to whom?
(CP, 54)

But the answers are not easily intelligible. In this dream-like state the protagonist is faced with eery directions-- "Dark hollows said, lee to the wind"--and quizzical riddles:

The shape of a rat?
It's bigger than that.
It's less than leg
And more than a nose,
Just under the water
It usually goes.

The Lost Son is met with his fetus:

It's sleek as an otter
With wide webby toes
Just under the water
It usually goes.
(CP, 55)

Clearly, the tomb has become womb and the Lost Son is back at his soft, fleshy beginnings, the embryo his self came to inhabit. This is the beginning of rebirth, the mystical first

step of awakening.

The second and third sections, "The Pit" and "The Gibber," reflect purgation, the second mystical step, as the search moves further into the depths of the unconscious:

At the wood's mouth,
By the cave's door,
I listened to something
I had heard before.

The cave is both Plato's and Freud's (the womb/tomb), where the Lost Son faces his illusions, his fear, his guilt. The ghost of his father--"Fear was my father, Father Fear" (CP, 56)--merges with his sexual fantasies, and his inflamed desires both sexual and financial, haunt him:

I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,
I run, I run to the whistle of money.

Money money money
Water water water

"These sweeps of light undo me," (CP, 57) cries the Lost Son, but actually these confrontations save him, for they bring him out of the dark of despair.

"The Return," the fourth section, is just that: the Lost Son slowly winds his way out of the unconscious, out of the disorder as he recalls the greenhouse of his youth and his powerful father restoring warmth and order there:

Scurry of warm over small plants.
Ordnung! Ordnung!
Papa is coming!

And the plants emerge, as the Lost Son does, from the cold dark: "The rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light." From this venture into the unconscious he has gained a better

understanding of his father and exorcised some of the guilt he bears from being a fatherless son.

"'It was beginning winter,'" the final section, further expresses the Lost Son's new found freedom from his illusions and guilt:

It was beginning winter,
The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
Over the dry seed-crowns,
The beautiful surviving bones
Swinging in the wind.
(CP, 58)

Like the "Dry seed-crowns," the Lost Son is "the beautiful surviving bones" of his father, and realizing this, he achieves partial illumination and the promise of further transcendence:

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.

Roethke remarks on this section in "Open Letter":

. . . the illumination, the coming of light suggested at the end of the last passage [of "The Return"] occurs again, this time to the nearly-grown man. But the illumination is still only partly apprehended; he is still "waiting." (SP, 39)

The Lost Son has made contact with his spirit and he will meet his spirit again. He is no longer completely lost, no longer alone; he perceives, albeit dimly, where he is and who he is. His vision is imperfect, but he is no longer blinded by total darkness.

"The Long Alley" is the second poem in the sequence. It consists of five sections and follows a pattern similar to

that of "The Lost Son." Rather than a still, dark body of water, here the journey into the unconscious is by a flowing stream: "A river glides out of the grass. A river or a serpent" (CP, 59). Immediately, we are forewarned that the journey is dangerous, deceptive, sexual. The protagonist proceeds into the dark and the fragmented where once again he seeks answers from the dead: "How long need the bones mourn?" And, "Who else breathes here? What does the grave say? / My gates are all caves." The last statement is ominous: the paths of the unconscious all lead to portentous pockets, Freudian haunts. But the journey itself and the questions are signs of awakening.

The second and third sections are steps of purgation, digging down deeper in the unconscious, questioning more. Guilt-ridden because of his adolescent preoccupation with his sexual self, the Lost Son is trying to find relief, forgiveness: "The fiend's far away. Lord, what do you require? / The soul resides in the horse barn"; "Stay close. Must I kill something else?" (CP, 60). In "The Lost Son" death is associated with the protagonist's father; here the killing is related to masturbation. As Roethke comments in "Open Letter," "onanism equals death" (SP, 40).

In the fourth section the protagonist turns to the flowers, beautiful and fragrant and alive--quite the opposite of his previous earth-bound mentors--for answers to the puzzling ways of the flesh:

Reach me rose, sweet one, still moist in the loam,
 Come, come out of the shade, the cool ways,
 The long alleys of string and stem;
 (CP, 61)

From the flowers the protagonist learns to stretch for the light, seek the way out of the dark through transcendence:

"Light airs! Light airs! A pierce of angels!" As in "The Lost Son," in this and the final section there is a movement away from the dark, from ignorance, toward illumination; the Lost Son decides, finally, to risk guilt and accept his sexuality:

Call off the dogs, my paws are gone.
 This wind brings many fish;
 The lakes will be happy:
 Give me my hands:
 I'll take the fire.

According to Roethke in a letter to Babette Deutsch, January, 1948, this is "a demand for release and acceptance of The Fire" (SL, 142). The long alley, the dark passageway the self must travel to reach the light, is, then, like the stems of the flowers, growth out of the dark, but as Roethke indicates, the way is not easy: "In 'The Long Alley' a serenity, a 'light,' was achieved, at a cost; but it was only partial and only for a time" (SL, 141).

The third is a three-part poem, "A Field of Light," that also traces the steps of awakening, purgation, and illumination, or as Roethke phrases it, "a regression, this time pretty violent; again a 'return,' at the end" (SL, 142). It begins similarly with death and darkness and water:

Came to lakes; came to dead water,
 Ponds with moss and leaves floating,
 Planks sunk in the sand.
 (CP, 62)

Alone in the rain, "In a watery drowse," the Lost Son comes to the realization that he is not without companionship--he is amidst nature: "Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone; / Marrow-soft, danced in the sand" (CP, 63). This newfound love between the protagonist and his surroundings brings him, in the third part of the poem, out of the dark and the self is reborn: "And I walked, I walked through the light air; / I moved with the morning." Finding love, the protagonist also finds illumination--"the great swing back into sunshine which is the reward of that painful descent into the 'cell of self-knowledge.'" ¹¹

"The Shape of the Fire" is the final long poem of The Lost Son sequence in this volume. It reveals an attempt by the protagonist to create order out of chaos, to understand "the shape" of the "fire" which he determined in the previous poem not to avoid--"I'll take the fire." The first of its five sections begins, familiarly, in the grave with the Lost Son striving to escape by appealing to the haunters of the dead: "Mother me out of here. What more will the bones allow?" (CP, 64). The second section contains riddles and rhymes with a Mother Goose flavor, echoing "The Lost Son" and "The Long Alley," and again emphasizing the necessity of returning to a child-like state of innocence, openness, awareness. The protagonist also faces old age in his quest for answers--"Him with the platitudes and rubber doughnuts, / Melting at the knees, a varicose horror" (CP, 65). The journey into the un-

conscious is, as always, frightening, but renewal and enlightenment are just as assured. So in the third part, a short, symbolic, cryptic section, the protagonist emerges knowing that salvation is possible:

An eye [I] comes out of the wave.
 The journey from flesh is longest.
 A rose sways least.
 The redeemer comes a dark way.
 (CP, 66)

The last line is perhaps the most significant, re-stating Roethke's, and the mystic's, belief that to go forward one must first go back, and to attain illumination, redemption, one must first go through the darkness of purgation. As Underhill says, pre-illumination or purification is "catharsis --that pruning and training of the human plant which is the essence of all education, and a necessary stage in every kind of transcendence."¹²

The fourth section continues the renewal as the protagonist turns away from the dark and the dead--"Death was not. / I lived in a simple drowse." And, the last section is a stirring, sensual, rising and filling to suspension with light, with illumination:

To know that light falls and fills, often without
 our knowing,
 As an opaque vase fills to the brim from a quick
 pouring,
 Fills and trembles at the edge yet does not flow
 over,
 Still holding and feeding the stem of the contained
 flower.
 (CP, 67)

This sense of being filled with light to the brim, to a trem-

bling balance, is both eerie and beautiful, a delicate effortless, yet precarious, state of illumination, for the Lost Son has still not discarded all doubts, still not discovered complete illumination. The journey out of the dark is long and painful.

These four long poems--"The Lost Son," "The Long Alley," "A Field of Light," and "The Shape of the Fire"--are obviously related in their intentions--their quest for identity, their movements out of the slime toward the light--and their imagery. The sequence is continued in Roethke's third volume of poetry, Praise to the End! (1951), in three more long poems that begin similarly in the dark, in denial, in terror, and end in various stages of illumination. It is not necessary to examine them as closely as the previous poems, but I do want to demonstrate the organic and evolutionary nature of the sequence.

The first of these poems, "Praise to the End!," finds the fatherless Lost Son alone in the dark wood with his fear and guilt. Again he is fishing in the dark pond, but he is remembering when such fishing was pleasant and easy: "I romped, lithe as a child, down the summery streets of my veins, / Strict as a seed, nippy and twiggy" (CP, 86). But things have changed, and "Now the water's low. The weeds exceed me." Still, he knows he must not stop seeking another reality: "My dearest dust, I can't stay here. / . . . I've been asleep in a bower of dead skin." So he gropes once more into

the unconscious, recalling the confusion of adolescence, of mingled pleasure and guilt. He emerges from this troubled journey rejuvenated: "I'm awake all over: / I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a dog" (CP, 88). Curiously, this new state is distinctly non-human. Even so, this poem more than the previous ones ends in self-approval: "The light becomes me." The dual meaning of "becomes" is further self-enhancing as the Lost Son edges ever closer to securing his identity.

"Unfold! Unfold!," the next long poem, brings forth two important aspects of the search for identity. One is the often overlooked peril of madness, and the other is the equally often overlooked source of the dead. In regard to the former, the protagonist is now terrified at the prospect of withdrawing again into the unconscious: "I can't crawl back through those veins, / I ache for another choice" (CP, 87). He scolds himself for his reticence--"It's time you stood up and asked / --Or sat down and did"--but his misgivings are justified: "The last time I nearly whispered myself away. / I was far back, farther than anybody else . . . Fishing, I caught myself behind the ears" (CP, 89). While this last line is amusing in the literal image it conjures up, a confrontation with the self--a plunge into the unconscious--is painful, dangerous, even mad. And these successive prowls into the unconscious, the abyss, do not get easier; rather, they are increasingly treacherous. This brings to mind Roethke's admonishing words

to Peter Viereck and his disturbing question, "What can bring you back?" This time the protagonist does not go back anew but remembers his last trip into the unconscious and his encounters there, and this seems not only satisfactory but refreshing: "Later, I did and I danced in the simple wood. / A mouse taught me how, I was a happy asker" (CP, 90). And the final sections of the poem reveal pleasant discoveries the protagonist makes as he comes out of the darkness, such as self-acceptance: "I'll seek my own meekness. / What grace I have is enough. / The lost have their own pace" (CP, 91). But such shrugging acceptance is not enough; the search for identity is not over. The poem ends:

In their harsh thickets
The dead thrash.
They help.

This acknowledgement of the dead is significant. The dead are necessary to the living. Understanding the dead, recognizing their restlessness, realizing their relationships to the living, will further help the Lost Son understand himself, recognize his own restlessness, ease his fears.

But Roethke is making a point beyond mere awareness of the dead, a point that reverberates throughout his poetry, as well as his notes and manuscripts: "I remember John Peale Bishop . . . saying, ' . . . the dead can be used, can be put to work, or something like that'--and of course he was right" (Box 28, folder 26). Roethke believed strongly in ancestry, hence the plight of the lost son rather than simply the lost

boy or soul. His search is not only for the self but for the maker of that self, the father and the Father. As he notes, "All men are more than one man" (Box 28, folder 26).

Moreover, Roethke is not just concerned with blood and religious ancestry. The title of each of the poems in Praise to the End! is borrowed from another poet, indicating both an allusion to the work and an ancestral bond to the poet. "Praise to the End!," for example, is from Wordsworth's Prelude, Book I. "Unfold! Unfold!" is from Henry Vaughan's "Revival."¹³ Roethke was well-aware of his debts to other poets and writers, of his tendency at times to imitate. In his essay "How to Write Like Somebody Else," he says: "Imitation, conscious imitation, is one of the great methods, perhaps the method of learning to write" (SP, 69). Further,

if a writer has something to say, it will come through. The very fact he has the support of a tradition, of an older writer, will enable him to be more himself--or more than himself.

In a time when the romantic notion of the inspired poet still has considerable credence, true 'imitation' takes a certain courage. One dares to stand up to a great style, to compete with papa. (SP, 69-70)

"Papa" makes clear Roethke's sense of a filial relationship with other poets and writers, and he recognized the need to take advantage of it:

It's a very central problem, isn't it. What to do with our ancestors

Let me say boldly: The great dead stand ready to help us. They can in a very real sense, be summoned. At least some of them have come for me. (Box 28, folder 26)

Roethke sums up his feelings on imitation most endearingly:

"For the truly original mind will break through the imitative shell/mould; like a kid busting through his little brother's hand-me-down pants. (That's a good homely metaphor isn't it)" (Box 28, folder 26).

I have digressed here because astute readers of the poetry cited thus far and hereafter undoubtedly hear the echoes of Roethke's literary ancestors, and while I do not intend to examine these voices, I want to acknowledge their presence and place in Roethke's quest for identity, personally and poetically.

We need to return now to The Lost Son sequence and "I Cry, Love! Love!" (the title comes from Blake), the remaining poem in Praise to the End!. Even though this poem begins "Went weeping, little bones. But where?" (CP, 92), the entire poem is very positive, joyous. The first section ends: "This toad could waltz on a drum; / I hear a most lovely huzza: / I'm king of the boops!" In the second section the speaker declares even more confidence: "Reason? That shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys! / The hedgewren's song says something else"; and, "I proclaim once more a condition of joy." The joy comes from the recognition of abounding love. The third section is particularly sensual, swaying with the motions of sexual intercourse ("in and out," "Downward and upward," "Dipping and veering," "backward and forward") while presenting the intercourse of natural things, the natural interchange and interconnectedness of subhuman creation--

bats and willows, fish and moonlight, waves and reeds, twigs,
leaves, stones--that culminates in the following:

The shine on the face of the lake
Tilts, backward and forward.
The water recedes slowly,
Gently rocking.

(CP, 93)

The poem ends with rebirth and the joyful knowledge that life
comes from love and that birth is not a solitary state:

Who untied the tree? I remember now.
We met in a nest. Before I lived.
The dark hair sighed.
We never enter
Alone.

"O, Thou Opening, O," the final poem of The Lost Son
sequence, is in Roethke's fourth volume, The Waking (1953),
for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. This three part poem,
which Roethke called "a randy rant" (SL, 181), is an interest-
ing mixture of tones and rhythms. The second part, for in-
stance, marks a shift from poetry to prose, and the protago-
nist's guise falls away as Roethke rails at himself, a poet
whose techniques and images and metaphors have been used re-
peatedly in previous poems to search the unconscious, call
forth the spiritual, find the Lost Son:

And now are we to have that pelludious Jesus-
shimmer over all things, the animal's candid gaze,
a shade less than feathers, light's broken speech
revived, a ghostly going of tame bears, a bright
moon on gleaming skin, a thing you cannot say to
whisper and equal a Wound?

I'm tired of all that, Bag-Foot. I can hear
small angels anytime. Who cares about the dance of
dead underwear, or the sad waltz of paper bags?
Who ever said God sang in your fat shape? You're
not the only keeper of hay. That's a spratling's
prattle. And don't be thinking you're simplicity's
sweet thing, either. A leaf could drag you.

(CP, 98)

But from this "great rage of a rocking heart," Roethke ironically returns to the compact and complex symbols that are by now common but no less effective:

The dark has its own light.
 A son has many fathers.
 Stand by a slow stream:
 Hear the sigh of what is.
 Be a pleased rock
 On a plain day.
 Waking's
 Kissing.
 Yes.

The rage, the purgation, as expected, brings relief, even ebullience, as in part three the speaker is leaping like a frog, "a body lighted with love" (CP, 99). The elation is subdued by the close of the poem, but the hope and illumination remain:

I keep dreaming of bees.
 This flesh has airy bones.
 Going is knowing.
 I see; I seek;
 I'm near.
 Be true,
 Skin.

The bones are no longer soft and chalky but airy; there is a sense of elevation, of being out of the mire. "Going is knowing" suggests that these ventures, often violent and terrifying, have not been in vain; in fact, he says "I'm near." And, lastly, there is an acceptance rather than a rejection of the flesh as the Lost Son simultaneously cautions and requests, "Be true, / Skin."

The Lost Son sequence, continuing through three volumes, each poem itself a sequence, is, then, a poetic psycho-

logical, mystical spiralling like a tendril from the dark and the deep toward the light, from ignorance toward knowledge, from being lost toward being found. And while the rewards are numerous, the madman, the mystic, the poet know that the teeming unconscious, that other reality, is not easy, not always pleasant. As Roethke points out in his notes: "The unconscious is like nature itself: it constantly is throwing up forms that may or may not be beautiful" (Box 28, folder 26). Still, the very search itself proves existence, substantiates selfhood, and that is most important.

There is another sequence, six long poems, that makes up the first part of Praise to the End!. These poems are similar to those of The Lost Son sequence and are often considered a part of that sequence. The protagonist is again a child, a lost son, and the poems are alike in their exploration of the unconscious and their concentration on the child's world as well as on sexuality. As Roethke has said, "We all know that poetry is shot through with appeals to the unconscious, to the fears and desires that go far back into our childhood, into the imagination of the race" (SP, 80). These poems, too, have short lines and familiar words and symbols, and their titles, like those of the other poems in this volume, are borrowings from other poets. The first two poems are especially of the child's world and the language is what Roethke termed "mutterkin's wisdom." He discusses this language at length in "Open Letter":

Rhythmically, it's the spring and rush of the child I'm after--and Gammer Burton's concision: mutterkin's wisdom. Most of the time the material seems to demand a varied short line. I believe that, in this kind of poem, the poet, in order to be true to what is most universal in himself, should not rely on allusion; should not comment or employ many judgment words; should not meditate (or maunder). He must scorn being "mysterious" or loosely oracular, but be willing to face up to genuine mystery. His language must be compelling and immediate: he must create an actuality. He must be able to telescope image and symbol, if necessary, without relying on the obvious connectives: to speak in a kind of psychic shorthand when his protagonist is under great stress. He must be able to shift his rhythms rapidly, the "tension." He works intuitively, and the final form of his poem must be imaginatively right. If intensity has compressed the language so it seems, on early reading, obscure, this obscurity should break open suddenly for the serious reader who can hear the language: the "meaning" itself should come as a dramatic revelation, an excitement. The clues will be scattered richly--as life scatters them; the symbols will mean what they usually mean--and sometimes something more. (SP, 41-2)

Even the titles of the poems in this sequence bespeak the language of the child's world, particularly the first title, "Where Knock Is Open Wide." This poem is the fascinating outpouring of a child's mind as he tries to comprehend and verbalize his world, his encounters with physical things, such as ears, parents, kittens, trees, and his encounters with emotional and abstract things, such as pain, time, near ("God, give me a near"), always ("Have I come to always? Not yet"), and have ("How high is have?"). The association of words--symbols--with things is central to the very young child's awareness, perception, and confusion. His innocent misunderstandings often ring with simple and startling truths:

A kitten can
Bite with his feet;
Papa and Mamma
Have more teeth.

(CP, 71)

Also, "A real hurt is soft," and "Nowhere is out" (CP, 73). Quite naturally, children's poems and fairy tales are woven through the child's thoughts, and the poem is rather a stream of consciousness retrospection that progresses from simple to more complex experiences: "I know it's an owl. He's making it darker"; "Maybe I'm lost, / Or asleep. . . . Fish me out. / Please" (CP, 72). His memories of his dead father are even more complicated because his father was a man whom he both feared and revered:

I was sad for a fish.
Don't hit him on the boat, I said.
Look at him puff. He's trying to talk.
Papa threw him back.

.

He watered the roses.
His thumb had a rainbow.
The stems said, Thank you.
Dark came early.

(CP, 73)

These lines portray a father of great power yet kindness, god-like, and Roethke indeed saw his father as a creator, a man who showed "a love for, and a creating of the beautiful (the flowers)" (SL, 162). Perhaps even more telling, Roethke says, "My father specialized in roses and orchids particularly" (SL, 254). The child in this portrait is equally sensitive to other living things, lesser beings. But the father is also a fragile specter:

Kisses come back,
 I said to Papa;
 He was all whitey bones
 And skin like paper.

The child, too young to understand death, is lost--has lost his father, has lost his God: "God's somewhere else, / I said to Mamma. . . . One father is enough. / Maybe God has a house. / But not here" (CP, 74). "Where Knock Is Open Wide" is a moving poem wherein the child is knocking at the door to awareness and discovering the pain and anger that are a part of life and death, a discovery that one never outgrows, never ceases making. This is, of course, illumination, and illumination means growth. As Underhill says, "Enlightenment is a symptom of growth: and growth is a living process, which knows no rest."¹⁴

"I Need, I Need" is a poem with a perspective that shifts between child and adolescent. A progression of remembrances, it begins with the child's first non-nursed meal--"A deep dish. Lumps in it. / I can't taste my mother" (CP, 74)--and ends with the adolescent's first experience with sexual intercourse--"I know another fire. / Has roots? (CP, 76). The first section of this poem depicts the child's world, and there are echoes from "Hey Diddle Diddle" (dish, spoon, diddle) and playful fantasies--"Scratched the wind with a stick. / The leaves liked it"--as well as disturbances--"Do the dead bite? / Mamma, she's a sad fat" (CP, 74). The second section is a by now famous incantatory dual between two somewhat older children jumping rope. The fourth and last section is the

arousing world of the sexually curious adolescent: "It's a dear life I can touch. / Who's ready for pink and frisk?" (CP, 76). "I Need, I Need," then, is a poem of remembered relationships that trace the protagonist's development from infancy through childhood to adolescence. Simultaneously, it reflects the mystical steps of awakening, purgation, and illumination. Such chronology is an effective mystical analogy.

The four remaining poems of this sequence focus on sexual desires, pleasure, frustrations, and guilt. Remembering that to Roethke "onanism equals death," sexual fantasies and masturbation translate to death-wishes: "(Is the protagonist 'happy' in his death-wish? Is he a mindless euphoric jigger who goes blithering into oblivion? No. In terms of the whole sequence, he survives: this is a dead-end explored. His self-consciousness, his very will to live saves him from the annihilation of the ecstasy)" (SP, 40-41). Death is examined rather than actuated, and each of these poems brings the protagonist closer to an understanding of love, closer to his own identity, closer to illumination.

Being about emotions and sexuality, the rhythms of these poems provide an engaging and complementary interplay. As Roethke tells us in "Some Remarks on Rhythm," "We must keep in mind that rhythm is the entire movement, the flow, the recurrence of stress and unstress that is related to the rhythms of the blood, the rhythms of nature" (SP, 78). (One remembers the motions of "I Cry, Love! Love!") Furthermore, "rhythm

gives us the very psychic energy of the speaker, in one emotional situation at least" (SP, 79).

While all Roethke's poetry is rhythmic and relies on repetition to some extent, "Bring the Day!," the third poem of the sequence, is especially repetitious, and pleasingly so:

Bees and lilies there were,
Bees and lilies there were,
Either to other,--
Which would you rather?
Bees and lilies were there.
(CP, 77)

"Repetition in word and phrase and in idea is the very essence of poetry . . ." (SP, 77). The pace, the rhythm, the repetition of the poems elicit more than pleasure: these are not merely simple, lilting, hypnotic incantations but the vital motions of physical and psychic energy. The poems are organic, moving and changing and growing as the protagonist moves, changes, grows, gaining awareness of himself and his world.

In "Bring the Day!" the protagonist, like the bees and lilies, is experiencing spring, and he longs to join in the busy activity. He is entranced by and curious about all the natural energy that surrounds him:

The herrings are awake.
What's all the singing between?--
Is it with whispers and kissing?--
I've listened into the least waves.

The protagonist, aware that he "can't marry the dirt" and ready and anxious to follow his natural impulses and sail into love, sets out: "It's time to begin! / To begin!" (CP, 78).

However, in "Give Way, Ye Gates" we find that man does

not make the transition into spring as easily as bees and lilies. This is an angry poem of sexual frustration:

Believe me, knot of gristle, I bleed like a tree;
I dream of nothing but boards;
I could love a duck.
(CP, 79)

But there is some final optimism:

The deep stream remembers:
Once I was a pond.
What slides away
Provides.
(CP, 80)

The next poem, "Sensibility! O La!," is similarly angry but more cynical in tone, as the protagonist claims in the opening line, "I'm the serpent of somebody else" (CP, 81), and in the closing lines, punning on sun, he flouts masturbation, for it is not enough:

The shade says: love the sun.
I have.
La, la,
The light turns.
(CP, 82)

This poem presents terror, loneliness, and alienation, but it also ends in a triumph of sorts, as the protagonist is at least insistent that he exists--"I am"--an important declaration according to Roethke: "To question existence one must first prove that one exists" (Box 28, folder 26). Now he is ripe for better things.

"O Lull Me, Lull Me," the last poem of this sequence, is affirmative--"I know my own bones"--even joyous:

I'm all ready to whistle;
I'm more than when I was born;
I could say hello to things;

I could talk to a snail;
 I see what sings!
 What sings!

(CP, 84)

So the sequence ends with the protagonist having discovered something about himself, about his world, and recognizing his potential for love of himself and others. This is, again, rebirth, that necessary step to transcendence. As C. Von Eckhartshausen says in "The Cloud upon the Sanctuary," "To be born simply means to enter into a world in which the senses dominate, in which wisdom and love languish in the bonds of individuality. To be re-born means to return to a world where the spirit of wisdom and love governs and animal-man obeys."¹⁵ Such altered reality is, of course, illumination.

Not only do the individual poems of the Praise to the End! sequence, like those of The Lost Son sequence, follow the mystical progression to illumination, the sequence does so itself. The first two poems, centered in the child's world, are of awakening. The next three poems reveal the pain, guilt, and confusion that mark purgation. The last poem expresses the release and happiness that stem from illumination, and the receptivity to it. The child protagonist and his imminent growth, spiritually as well as biologically, are most suitable to poems that are really evolutionary in their move toward enlightenment. Thus The Lost Son and The Praise to the End! sequences are cyclical, uncoiling with the newness of incremental repetition, like the seasons that are themselves expected yet so unpredictable.

Roethke's fifth volume, Words for the Wind (1958), contains two more long poems. He was in his forties when he wrote "The Dying Man" and "Meditations of an Old Woman," not an old man by any means, but not an insecure adolescent either. Yet his search for identity continued:

It is often thought that the problem of personal identity belongs solely to immaturity, to an adolescent; that the intelligent man solves this, and goes on to more important matters. In our time, this problem remains with us--and this is not just because we are Americans, notoriously slow at coming into maturity, or never arrive there at all. He who does maintain aware, lively--dare we say happy or even joyful--in the face of the hideous machines and means we devise against the noises of hell itself--he is the true hero, the free, the invincibly friendly man, that artist in everyman . . . (Box 28, folder 26).

So it is that Roethke pursued the problem of identity throughout his life and poetry. In these two particular poems Roethke's protagonists are on opposite sides of the spectrum of life from the protagonists in The Lost Son and the Praise to the End! sequences. Here the protagonists are facing their deaths not their lives. Since approaching death brings reflection and recollection and the final confrontation with oneself, one's purpose, it too is a time of delving into the unconscious, of fishing "in the old wound, / The soft pond of repose" (CP, 53). This time, however, there are some noticeable differences, as we learn that it is easier to deny the flesh, the physical world, when one is young than when one is old and is faced with the certainty of that denial.

"The Dying Man" may be dedicated to Yeats, and cer-

tainly there are Yeatsian echoes in the lines and rhythms, but the dying man is clearly the Roethkean protagonist we have met before, and the concerns are the same--the body and the spirit, the dark and the light, the dead and the living, sanity and madness, and overall, the self and identity. But Roethke looks at death, at the ravaging of flesh and bones, from a perspective altered by time and experience. Even though the spirit is seen as the essence of Being, in the end Roethke refuses to loosen his grasp willingly on the physical, the sensual, which is also Being. The ambiguity makes this a most touching and human poem.

To begin, Roethke's Yeats says in "His Words," the first section, "'What's done is yet to come; / The flesh deserts the bone, / But a kiss widens the rose'" (CP, 153). The body, as we saw in the earlier poems, is temporary, unreliable, dying daily. But the spirit--the kiss--the symbol of love, is enlarging, opening, giving. The second section, "What Now?," recalls the dark beginnings of the poems of The Lost Son sequence--"Places great with their dead, / The mire, the sodden wood,"--but the protagonist is not seduced by the cries of the dead. Rather, he says, they "Remind me to stay alive" (CP, 154). Still, in "The Wall," section three, the protagonist is haunted by the same ghosts, darkness, and madness that visited the Lost Son: "A ghost comes out of the unconscious mind / To grope my sill: It moans to be reborn! . . . I found my father when I did my work, / Only to lose

myself in this small dark" (CP, 154). The dark invades him, and he knows that he must accept and even love it before he can transcend it and find inner peace and vision: "The wall has entered: I must love the wall, / A madman staring at perpetual night, / A spirit raging at the visible. / I breathe alone until my dark is bright" (CP, 155). Inner and outer reality, the invisible and visible worlds, are captured once again in the central images of dark and light, and as before the spirit is like a tendril bending to the light, but now the protagonist (Yeats? Roethke?) asks whether for the poet--the "sensual eye [I]"--who is on the verge of death, who is about to transcend forever the physical world, it is possible to sever the invisible from the visible, to deny completely that physical, outer reality that he is leaving behind: "Though it reject dry borders of the seen, / What sensual eye can keep an image pure, / Leaning across a sill to greet the dawn?"

Clearly, the poem also follows the mystical steps. "His Words" is an awakening to the spirit. It ends, "I am that final thing, / A man learning to sing" (CP, 153). Sections two and three are cathartic prenatal returns to the dark, the womb/tomb, to recover the light, to be reborn: "Caught in the dying light, / I thought myself reborn" (CP, 154), and "Dawn's where the white is. Who would know the dawn / When there's a dazzling dark behind the sun?" (CP, 155). Sections four and five, then, show the protagonist gaining the vision

of illumination. In "The Exulting," section four, there is an echo of the final lines of "I Cry, Love! Love!" ("We never enter / Alone" [CP, 93]): "Flesh cries to flesh; and bone cries out to bone; / I die into this life, alone yet not alone" (CP, 155). Also, the ironic and paradoxical "By dying daily, I have come to be" (CP, 155) recalls "Going is knowing" from "O, Thou Opening, O" (CP, 99), and from "The Waking"--"I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. / I learn by going where I have to go" (CP, 108). The last lines of this section, "A breath is but a breath: I have the earth; / I shall undo all dying by my death," present the arrogance and certainty of one who is confident of an eternal spirit, as both Yeats and Roethke must have been finally.

"They Sing, They Sing" is the last section and it continues this confidence in a complex and paradoxical way:

I've the lark's word for it, who sings alone:
 What's seen recedes; Forever's what we know!--
 Eternity defined, and strewn with straw,
 The fury of the slug beneath the stone.
 The vision moves, and yet remains the same.
 In heaven's praise, I dread the thing I am.
 (CP, 156)

This is an anthem to the physical world, not the spiritual. The visible not the invisible is proof of, knowledge of, Forever, and it is the small of the visible, physical world--slugs and straw--that substantiate permanence, immortality, if you will. By exalting heaven and the spiritual world one denigrates himself, denies his flesh in search of his soul. Whereas we might expect Roethke to praise such denial, the

actual physical loss of Yeats makes him take another view of life and death. Thus the poem ends beautifully and wisely: "he dares to live / Who stops being a bird, yet beats his wings / Against the immense immeasurable emptiness of things" (CP, 156). That is, rather than being a soul/spirit (bird), living is being one's physical self--beating one's wings, using one's body to prove one's existence, to stand up to the unknown and unknowable. Here illumination is acknowledging the value of one's flesh, the beauty of one's body, and not dreading "the thing I am." As with most memorial works, this poem is a hymn to life, specifically Yeats' life, but to all lives and to Roethke's life nonetheless.

"Meditations of an Old Woman" is a much longer and more complex work. It actually begins with a short, earlier poem, "Old Lady's Winter's Words" in The Waking, which is similar to "The Dying Man." Like the Dying Man, and unlike the Lost Son in the earlier sequences who was searching for his place in the world, trying to belong, the Old Lady feels herself losing touch with the world:

Like the half-dead, I hug my last secrets.
O for some minstrel of what's to be,
A bird singing into the beyond,
The marrow of God, talking,
Full merry, a gleam
Gracious and bland,
On a bright stone.

(CP, 103)

Indeed, this is a poem about losses, loss of memory ("If only I could remember"), loss of pleasantries ("The good day has gone"), loss of fertility ("The shrunken soil / Has scampered

away in a dry wind"), loss of self-love ("Once I was sweet with the light of myself, / A self-delighting creature"), and loss of the will to live ("I fall, more and more, / Into my own silences, / In the cold air, / The spirit / Hardens" [CP, 103-04]). The Old Lady more and more falls prey to loneliness: "I've become a sentry of small seeds, / Poking alone in my garden." She has, like the Dying Man, to be "reminded to stay alive"; however, unlike the Dying Man, she is all but spiritless and silent. Not beating her wings, she is all but lost, all but dead both physically and spiritually.

The Old Woman of "Meditations of an Old Woman" is a more complex figure as this is a more complex poem, consisting of five long, sectioned pieces. Along the order of The Lost Son and the Praise to the End! sequences, each of these poems represents a spiritual spiralling in the mystical tradition: having three to five sections, each meditation begins with awakening, goes backward to remembrance and therein purification, then forward to at least partial illumination.

"First Meditation" finds the Old Woman considering herself and her fate:

I've become a strange piece of flesh,
Nervous and cold, bird-furtive, whiskery,
With a cheek soft as a hound's ear.
(CP, 157)

Her physical self almost a stranger to her, she thinks of the spirit within, but notes, "The spirit moves, but not always upward." And "On love's worst ugly day" encroaching death brings the realization of the triumph of time and also of the

spirit: "The small winds make their chilly indictments." The spirit, the survivor, is not always welcome--"The rind, often, hates the life within." The Old Woman turns from the bleak present, seeking answers from the past, seeking comfort in the knowledge that "All journeys, I think are the same: / The movement is forward, after a few wavers" (CP, 158). So it is with the journey of the spirit as it seeks eternity, "tries for another life, / Another way and place in which to continue" (CP, 159). This recognition gives a certain solace to the Old Woman, who, in the final section of the poem, discovers, if not illumination, some contentment and peace: "There are still times, morning and evening: / In such times, lacking a god, / I am still happy."

The next poem, "I'm Here," reveals what displeases as well as pleases the Old Woman. In the first section she is irritated by the small and the young:

Outside, the same sparrows bicker in the eaves.
I'm tired of tiny noises:
The April cheeping, the vireo's insistence,
The prattle of the young no longer pleases.
(CP, 161)

Aging, dying, life seems too important to be wasted on the petty concerns of the tiny and the unformed, and their very presence and vitality abrades on the Old Woman. But then, in the second section, she recalls how she was once young, "Flesh-awkward, half-alive," and how, like the Old Lady of "Old Lady's Winter Words," she was a self-delighting creature, "Bemused; pleased to be." Sensuous and sensual, she "was queen of the

vale" and, she remembers,

I sang to the edges of flame,
My skin whiter in the soft weather,
My voice softer.

No longer that young, frolicking person, in the third section her remembrance shifts from the physical to the spiritual --"In the slow coming-out of sleep, / On the sill of the eyes, something flutters" (CP, 162). She turns from outer to inner reality:

In my grandmother's inner eye,
So she told me when I was little,
A bird always kept singing.
She was a serious woman.
(CP, 163)

Comforted by the thought of the "inner eye [I]" and the bird (spirit), gradually the Old Woman remembers only the pleasant things--"The eyes rejoice in the act of seeing"--and the beautiful things, flowers, trees, stillness:

I prefer the still joy:
The wasp drinking at the edge of my cup;
A snake lifting its head;
A snail's music.
(CP, 164)

The small are no longer annoying; all signs of life are enchanting. Becalmed by her backward journey, the last section finds the Old Woman resigned to her fate, peaceful, ready for death:

Birds are around. I've all the singing I would.
.....
It's not my first dying.
.....

If the wind means me,
I'm here!
Here.

"Her Becoming," the third poem, is a further examination of self. The Old Woman reminds us of the Lost Son with his ghosts and his questions, questions that reflect awakening, groping for understanding of self and soul and God, of what it means to Be: "Am I a bird?"; "What's a seed?"; "Dare I embrace a ghost from my own breast?"; "A ghost from the soul's house?"; and "Who knows / The way out of a rose?" (CP, 165). In the second section the Old Woman turns from the spiritual to the objective, the mechanical--"Is there a wisdom in objects?"--trying to penetrate their very existence and discover their relationship to her, to man. They are, she concludes, pitiful: "Machines, machines, loveless, temporal; / Mutilated souls in cold morgues of obligation" (CP, 160). These lines echo the horror of "Dolor," the "Desolation in immaculate public places," and the "Endless duplication of lives and objects" (CP, 46), the things that force us to seek another reality, to become a saint, a mystic, a drunk, or, as in section three, to run naked through a field in the moonlight:

Where was I going? Where?
What was I running from?
To these I cried my life--
The loved fox, and the wren.
(CP, 166)

The contrast between herself and the cold machines brings the Old Woman to the reality of self and love: "I love because I am / A rapt thing with a name" (CP, 167). Living means loving. The short, final section is a reaffirmation of the Old Woman's loving self and her communion with the natural world, the liv-

ing, and ultimately the spiritual:

Ask all the mice who caper in the straw--
 I am benign in my own company.
 A shape without a shade, or almost none,
 I hum in pure vibration, like a saw.
 The grandeur of a crazy one alone!--
 By swoops of bird, by leaps of fish, I live.
 My shadow steadies in a shifting stream;
 I live in air; the long light is my home;
 I dare caress the stones, the field my friend;
 A light wind rises: I become the wind.

"Fourth Meditation" returns to the still unsolved problem of identity: "I was always one for being alone, / Seeking in my own way, eternal purpose; / At the edge of the field waiting for the pure moment" (CP, 168). The Old Woman thinks of her youth and her self-preoccupation: "Was it yesterday I stretched out the thin bones of my innocence? / O the songs we hide, singing only to ourselves!" But she cannot forget that she is facing death: "The soul stands, lonely in its choice, / Waiting, itself a slow thing, / In the changing body." In section two she again questions existence and what it means:

What is it to be a woman?
 To be contained, to be a vessel?
 To prefer a window to a door?
 A pool to a river?
 To become lost in love, . . . ?
 (CP, 169)

Profound in her simplicity, wise in her old age, she knows that the "self-involved" are lost, their lives are meaningless:

Have they seen, ever, the sharp bones of the poor?
 Or known, once, the soul's authentic hunger,
 Those cat-like immaculate creatures
 For whom the world works?

The self-involved--"The ritualists of the mirror, the lonely drinkers, / The minions of benzedrine and paraldehyde, / And those who submerge themselves deliberately in trivia"--are little better than machines. Ironically, her own self-involvement momentarily dissolves in her awareness of and concern for the awakening of others: "How I wish them awake! / May they lean into light and live" (CP, 169). But impending death brings her back to herself; now, however, she is prepared for what is ahead:

Is my body speaking? I breathe what I am:
The first and last of all things.
Near the graves of the great dead,
Even the stones speak.
(CP, 170)

Her self-perception is clearing and her fear and anger are abating.

The final poem of the sequence, "What Can I tell My Bones?," opens "Beginner, / Perpetual beginner" (CP, 171), a statement that sums up both the cyclical and evolutionary pattern of Roethke's poetry, especially the sequences, and his philosophical view of himself as well as his protagonists, forever learning anew, forever discovering and re-discovering what it means to be alive, to be a living thing, to be a creation and a creator. But, he cautions: "The soul knows not what to believe," and "O my bones, / Beware those perpetual beginnings, / Thinning the soul's substance." Beginnings are exhausting, as Roethke knew, as the Old Woman knows; and if death is a new beginning, still there is "a fearful ignorance."

As the Old Woman remarks, "It is difficult to say all things are well, / When the worst is about to arrive" (CP, 172).

She sums up her life simply:

Loved heart, what can I say/
When I was a lark, I sang;
When I was worm, I devoured.

The self says, I am;
The heart says, I am less;
The spirit says, you are nothing.

The separate selves persist. The problem of identity is complex; identity is ever uncertain. Thus the Old Woman asks, "What can I tell my bones?" Must the body be forsaken? She concedes, "I'm a small stone, loose in the shale. / Love is my wound." Frightened, she ponders her condition, her isolation and her fragility, and longs for the surcease of sanity:

The cause of God in me--has it gone?
Do these bones live? Can I live with these bones?
Mother, mother of us all, tell me where I am!
O to be delivered from the rational into the realm
 of pure song,
My face on fire, close to the points of a star,
A learned nimble girl,
Not drearily bewitched,
But sweetly daft.

Sagely she says, "To try to become like God / Is far from becoming God. / O, but I seek and care!" Her earnestness is real, but so in her self-delusion: "I rock in my own dark, / Thinking, God has need of me." Still, her self-searching has brought her illumination:

I'm released from the dreary dance of opposites.
The wind rocks with my wish; the rain shields me;
I live in light's extreme; I stretch in all directions;
Sometimes I think I'm several.
(CP, 173)

Of course, she is several--several separate selves. The perpetual beginner, she is reborn--"I'm wet with another life"--spiritually, eternally, without asking:

What came to me vaguely is now clear,
As if released by a spirit,
Or agency outside me.
Unprayed-for,
And final.

The Old Woman is redeemed.

"Meditations of an Old Woman" is a sequence or cycle of poems that traces the thoughts of its protagonist backward and forward, up and down, in and out, her mind rocking and twisting and finally winding its way out of the mire and into the light. The Old Woman is reborn, a transcendent being. North American Sequence, the last sequence I am going to discuss, is similarly progressive, similarly hopeful and regenerative.

Published posthumously in The Far Field (1964), North American Sequence is perhaps Roethke's greatest work.¹⁶ These six long poems continue the spiralling search for identity. If this seems an endless search, an endless journey, it is. As Roethke comments: "The trouble with the modern hero's journey is that it isn't long enough. It becomes a foray into Lithuania, a guerilla raid upon a particular area of consciousness" (Box 28, folder 26). For Roethke such treks are not the answer; the answer lies in the unconscious. And while "with some, releasing the unconscious is the releasing of very little" (Box 28, folder 26), Roethke insists that "The uncon-

scious is the real source of art: it may provide the rhythm or the initial impulse in many dreams--but it is the conscious artist, he who has kept himself in training for the moment when the material wells up, gushes forth, who will create the work of art, the true poem" (Box 28, folder 26). Roethke was ever ready for the moment and willing to take whatever necessary risks there might be--critical attacks, bouts of madness, abject horror. Thus he was critical of those, such as Robert Graves, who were (at least in Roethke's eyes) less sacrificing:

Many of our chief spokesmen are afraid of the unconscious: they pay lip-service to it--Graves, for instance, but it doesn't appear except in a ghosty-grisly way: he knows all about primitive gods & goddesses, rituals, words, charms--but he's a far cry from a primitive sensibility, either as Graves the man or Graves the poet. He can see the fairies in the bottom of the garden, or his other self through the window--but of the true descent he is wary. (Box 28, folder 26)

Of course, Roethke himself was wary, as I pointed out previously, but he also felt sincerely the need to probe deeply into the night of the unconscious, and so in North American Sequence he casts once again into the dark, symbolical pond.

The protagonist is older now, and the unconscious is a familiar, though still frightening and repulsive, haunt. Thus, in "The Longing" he describes the unconscious as,

A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,
Worse than castoreum of mink or weasels,
Saliva dripping from warm microphones,
Agony of crucifixion on barstools.
(CP, 187)

Weary of life, unhappy--"Happiness left to dogs and children--"
the protagonist ruminates about his condition:

Lust fatigues the soul.
How to transcend this sensual emptiness?
(Dreams drain the spirit if we dream too long.)
.

And the spirit fails to move forward,
But shrinks into a half-life, less than itself,
Falls back, a slug, a loose worm
Ready for any crevice,
An eyeless starrer.

He is fearful that he has spent too much of his life searching the dark, for he knows the self remains purposeless if it is not rescued from the unconscious, if it sinks in despair and does not find understanding, illumination. But in the second section his depression abates as he recognizes that "A wretch needs his wretchedness. Yes," and also as he remembers "How comprehensive that felicity! . . . / A body with the motion of a soul" (CP, 188). Suddenly he is aware that his life, his meditation, his longing has been a preparation for a new life: "The light cries out, and I am there to hear--." He reminds us that the important thing to remember about the dreck and the dark of the collective unconscious is that "Out of these nothings / --All beginnings come." And the third and last section is a wishful, hopeful cataloguing in which the revived protagonist dreams of what he would be--"I would be a stream . . . / A leaf . . ."--of his new beginnings. Ready to be reborn, he fancies,

Old men should be explorers?
I'll be an Indian.
Ogalala?
Iroquois.

(CP, 189)

The longing, then, is for forward motion, for awakening to a new future, embarking on a new life.

"Meditation at Oyster River" is the second poem of the sequence. The river, the stream, is, of course, a symbol of motion, of life, of hope, but here the images of life are mingled with those of death as one cannot be separated from the other:

Over the low, barnacled, elephant-colored rocks,
Come the first tide-ripples, moving, almost without
 sound, toward me,
Running along the narrow furrows of the shore, the
 rows of dead clam shells;

And,

A fish raven turns on its perch (a dead tree in the
 rivermouth),
Its wings catching a last glint of the reflected
 sunlight.

(CP, 190)

The protagonist reflects upon himself--"The self persists like a dying star, / In sleep, afraid"--upon death--"Death's face arises afresh, / Among the shy beasts, the deer . . . / . . . The young snake . . . The hummingbird . . . With these I would be"--and upon the water--"And with water: the waves coming forward, without cessation, / The waves . . . The tongues of water, creeping in, quietly" (CP, 190-91). Contemplative, peaceful, "In this hour, / In this first heaven of knowing, / The flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit," he sits atop a rock, gazing at the water, and his thoughts return him to "A Michigan brook in April" when the ice cracks and re-freezes:

And I long for the blast of dynamite,
The sudden sucking roar as the culvert loosens its

debris of branches and sticks,
 Welter of tin cans, pails, old bird nests, a child's
 shoe riding a log,
 As the piled ice breaks away from the battered spiles,
 And the whole river begins to move forward, its
 bridges shaking.

Clearly, he yearns to free his spirit that too long has been
 trapped in his cold, desolate, debris-clogged unconscious.
 And he is at least partly successful, for in the final sec-
 tion of the poem, old but with the serenity and security of a
 fetus in the womb or a cradled newborn, he sways in passive
 yet willful unison with his world:

Now, in this waning of light,
 I rock with the motion of morning;
 In the cradle of all that is,
 I'm lulled into half-sleep
 By the lapping of water,
 Cries of the sandpiper.

.

In the first of the moon,
 All's a scattering,
 A shining.

(CP, 191-92)

"Journey to the Interior" further explores the uncon-
 scious in order to reconcile self and soul, life and death,
 outer and inner reality. Roethke uses the metaphor of a de-
 tour through desolate terrain to envision the precariousness:
 "In the long journey out of the self, / There are many de-
 tours, washed-out interrupted raw places" (CP, 193). The nu-
 merous adjectives emphasize the horror of the landscape, the
 loneliness of such a mission: cracking, wind-bitten, swollen,
beaten, burnt, sharp, ugly. We are reminded of the Old Woman's
 rough and winding journey in "Meditations of an Old Woman."

This aging protagonist too recalls the ups and downs and turns and hazards of the journey: "I remember how it was to drive in gravel, / Watching for dangerous down-hill places, where the wheels whined beyond eighty--." "The dusty detour" (CP, 194)--"the muddiness and filth of the unconscious" (Box 28, folder 26)--is not an easy path, not the way of the weak-hearted, but for those who choose it there are rewards. So the protagonist avers of his journey, "In the moment of time when the small drop forms, but does not fall, / I have known the heart of the sun,--." He is calm, though death is near: "I rehearse myself for this: / The stand at the stretch in the face of death." Prepared, with certainty, he concludes: "As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning, / I know this change: / . . . The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing, / And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep" (CP, 195). While this is not a jubilant welcoming of death of the body, certainly it is a peaceful resignation, an enlightened acceptance of the inevitable.

The fourth poem of this sequence is "The Long Waters." Water, again, is symbolic of life, a reservoir of life, as the pond is symbolic of the collective unconscious. The long waters are the "streams flowing seaward" and the sea itself. The protagonist, like the protagonists in all the poems of this sequence, is facing himself as he faces death, recognizing his pride and his excesses:

And I acknowledge my foolishness with God,
My desire for the peaks, the black ravines, the

rolling mists
 Changing with every twist of wind,
 The unsinging fields where no lungs breathe,
 Where light is stone.

(CP, 196)

The protagonist, aware that he is at the point in his life where physical and spiritual meet and divide, seeks a natural spot of similar communion and separateness, juncture and disjuncture. And so, "I return where fire has been, / To the charred edge of the sea / Where the fresh and salt waters meet." The edge is a favorite place of Roethke's because it is so ambiguous, embracing both certainty and terror, reality and the abyss, sanity and madness, ending and beginning, life and death, body and soul. The edge is usually land and air or land and water, but here the edge marks the unity of fresh and salt water, of all waters. The protagonist pauses at the edge of his life and enjoys sweet memories, his mind an edge merging past and present:

That star winking beyond itself,
 The cricket-voice deep in the midnight field,
 The blue jay rasping from the stunted pine.

How slowly pleasure dies!--
 The dry bloom splitting in the wrinkled vale,
 The first snow of the year in the dark fir.
 Feeling, I still delight in my last fall.

(CP, 196-97)

The vision of the star, the bloom, the snow in the fir, the sounds of the cricket and the jay--such pleasures are not only recalled, not only seen and heard anew, but felt. Once again the truth of Roethke's "The Waking" echoes in our ears: "We think by feeling. What is there to know?" (CP, 108).

In the third section of this poem the protagonist continues gazing upon the waters, which continue bathing him with remembrances: "These waves, in the sun, remind me of flowers" (CP, 197). Flowers, for anyone who knows Roethke's greenhouse poems and the greenhouse of his youth, telescope time and space, capsule his life, his past journeys. The fourth section, too, is recollection that sweeps in with the waves:

I remember a stone breaking the eddying current,
Neither white nor red, in the dead middle way,
Where impulse no longer dictates, nor the darkening
shadow,
A vulnerable place,
Surrounded by sand, broken shells, the wreckage of
water.

The somber adjectives in this passage--dead, darkening, vulnerable, broken--call our attention again to the perfidy of the unconscious: it is not always a pleasant place, not always "the soft pond of repose," but at times "the wreckage of water." The protagonist, himself "in the dead middle way," at the edge of inner and outer reality, is unsure of the future, sure only of his vulnerability.

The final section, however, assuages his fears and anguish as the protagonist rejoices in his vision of and union with himself and his world, a vision that is worth the darkness and the pain that so often accompany the search for understanding and identity:

My body shimmers with a light flame.

I see in the advancing and retreating waters
The shape that came from my sleep, weeping:
The eternal one, the child, the swaying vine branch,
.....

I, who came back from the depths laughing too loudly,
 Become another thing;
 My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves;
 I lose and find myself in the long water;
 I am gathered together once more;
 I embrace the world.

(CP, 198)

The long waters are the untangling of a vast network of memories, observations, journeys, as they flow together in a restorative and harmonious culmination, in illumination.

"The Far Field" is also a poem about culmination.

The far field is infinity, eternity, "the windy cliffs of forever" (CP, 200). The protagonist, no longer young, dreams repeatedly of death, of final journeys--"Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel, / Of driving alone, without luggage, Ending at last in a hopeless sand-rut" (CP, 199). But he is not afraid of death because "At the field's end One learned of the eternal." That is, life itself teaches us of life eternal:

For to come upon warblers in early May
 Was to forget time and death:

--Or to lie naked in sand,
 In the silted shallows of a slow river,
 Fingering a shell,
 Thinking:
 Once I was something like this, . . .

Or to sink down to the hips in a mossy quagmire;
 Or, with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log,
 Believing:
 I'll return again,
 As a snake or a raucous bird,
 Or, with luck, as a lion.

(CP, 199-200)

The natural world is evidence to the protagonist of his own

infinity, of the immortality of the self: "The river turns on itself, / The tree retreats into its own shadow. / I feel a weightless change, a moving forward." Indeed, the protagonist has moved beyond acceptance of death: "I am renewed by death, thought of my death, / What I love is near at hand, / Always, in earth and air" (CP, 201). His assurance, his unwavering certainty of eternity has made him comfortably wise:

The lost self changes,
Turning toward the sea,
A sea-shape turning around,--
An old man with his feet before the fire,
In robes of green, in garments of adieu.

A chameleon-like nature, the ability to change, to become something other than oneself--"Turning toward the sea, / A sea-shape turning around,--" is for Roethke the key to illumination. Too often a man sees only himself. Such a man--"A man faced with his own immensity"--remains a finite creature. For him there is no far field--"The murmur of the absolute, the why / Of being born fails on his naked ears"--unless he learns to see that "All finite things reveal infinitude." Then he knows oneness: "The pure serene of memory in one man,-- / A ripple widening from a single stone / Winding around the waters of the world." Oneness, which I examine in detail in Chapter 4, is for Roethke eternal joy. That one's memory, one's mind, one's thoughts trigger universal reverberations is a triumph of immortality, ultimate glory--no doubt what Roethke sought as a man and a poet.

"The Rose" brings this sequence of poems to a close with Roethke's most immutable yet elastic symbol, and certainly one of literature's most enduring. This rose is "A single wild rose, struggling Out of the briary hedge, the tangle of matted underbrush" (CP, 203). Further, the rose is located "where sea and fresh water meet" (CP, 202), a place that, as we learned in "The Long Waters," and as the speaker tells us here, "Is important--." The rose, "Flowering out of the dark, / Widening at high noon, face upward" (CP, 203), is the self turning from the dark unconscious, from its own immensity, to the light from above, to God. At the same time, the rose is a signal to the past, drawing the self into the unconscious:

And I think of roses, roses,
 White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot green-
 houses,
 And my father standing astride the cement benches,
 Lifting me high over the four-foot stems, . . .

What need for heaven, then,
 With that man, and those roses?

The rose is love and life, security. It makes the protagonist forget his fragility, his mortality, his empirical self--but only momentarily. An old man facing death, the rose paradoxically returns the protagonist to himself and yet removes him from himself:

Near this rose, . . .
 . . . I came upon the true ease of myself,
 As if another man appeared out of the depths of my
 being,
 And I stood outside myself,
 Beyond becoming and perishing,

A something wholly other,

 And I rejoiced in being what I was:
 (CP, 205)

The rose represents the union of inner and outer reality, the bliss of motion and stasis. To sway wildly, to feel the pitching, rolling, dipping of a sailing ship (CP, 203)--of the soul moving toward God--and yet to remain firmly anchored, to stay forever planted in the earth, that is euphoria, ecstasy, where "one is conscious of God only and all consciousness of self is obliterated" (Box 28, folder 26), and that is the rose:

. . . this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
 Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
 Gathering to itself sound and silence--
 Mine and the sea-wind's.
 (CP, 205)

The rose, like the edge, is a symbol that embraces opposites: stillness and movement, sound and silence, body and soul/spirit--the several separate selves--past and future, life and death. Also, it is the conventional symbol of love and remembrance, and perhaps that is the most important reason for choosing the rose as the consummate symbol of this sequence; after all, according to Roethke the only thing that can bring one back from the abyss, spiral one forward from the unconscious, is love; and, too, love is what, as we shall see more clearly in Chapter 3, brings unification, oneness, and eternal joy.

The search for identity is complicated, involving many journeys, each carrying the seeker closer to self-real-

zation, to rebirth, delivering him from the darkness to illumination, to God. Roethke has been criticized for devoting himself too singularly to this search, for being self-indulgent, for relying too heavily on the same symbols and patterns, for being silly and salacious, but such critics have misunderstood Roethke, misunderstood the poetry:

I have tried to transmute and purify my "life," the sense of being defiled by it, in both small and formal and somewhat blunt short poems, and latterly, in longer poems which try in their rhythms to catch the very movement of the mind itself, to trace the spiritual history of a protagonist (not "I," personally), of all haunted and harried men; to make in this series . . . a true and not arbitrary order which will permit many ranges of feeling, including humor. (SP, 15)

Perhaps because of his sincerity and conviction, Roethke, while surprised, was undaunted by such critics: "In a time when the self is more and more lost--when millions want it to be lost--like the disillusion of the production line, of the meaningless task, academic or otherwise--a true concern with the self, a true effort at self-affirmation, however heroic, partakes for them of the comic and obscene" (Box 28, folder 26). And he counters: "The worship of one's own soul is not enough--though it's already a good deal, an[d] scarcely an obscene activity" (Box 28, folder 26). Roethke's "own soul," the self of his poetry, is not singular and static. As Stanley Kunitz says,

Roethke's imagination is populated with shapeshifters, who turn into the protagonists of his poems. Most of these protagonists are aspects of the poet's

own being, driven to know itself and yet appalled by the terrible necessity of self-knowledge; assuming every possible shape in order to find the self and to escape the finding; dreading above all the state of annihilation, the threat of non-being; and half-yearning at the last for the oblivion of eternity, the union of the whole spirit with the spirit of the whole universe.¹⁷

Kunitz captures well Roethke's ambiguous nature. Ambiguity is central to Roethke's poetry and his life. Roethke's bi-focal vision creates both the tension and the expansion of his poems, which are at once painfully, even embarrassingly at times, personal and, no less painfully, undeniably universal--we are all of us in search of ourselves, in quest of an understanding, even proof, of existence. While Roethke jocularly concedes existence--"I grant existence is possible: here are all these people digging into their grapefruits of a morning" (Box 28, folder 26)--his poetry is a serious striving to confront and confirm something more, an existence beyond the empirical. Roethke is concerned with a more metaphysical existence, with the transcendent self, the existence of the self outside, beyond the body--spiritual existence--an existence that has to be proved on the senses and in the recesses of the mind, which is often his territory. "Of some of this work it has been said 'X sinks into the very bed of self. Out of the disorder of self, he finds those images central to his being. X creates truly archetypal images . . .'" But he adds, "disorder has its own life and its own principle of existence" (Box 28, folder 26), and this is what Roethke is after understanding. So he plunges into the unconscious and risks the abyss, risks

madness from which he fears he might never return. The unconscious, as we have seen, "is a dark world in which to work and the demands, other than technical, made upon the writer are savage" (SP, 42). But the unconscious, as he came to realize, is not the only source of self-discovery, of illumination: "in the fight to come out of oneself, it is sometimes necessary to become another. Hence the doctrine of the mask" (Box 28, folder 26). Hence, Roethke's concentration on otherness, the subject of my next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

AWAKENING TO THE LOVE OF OTHERNESS

Roethke tells us that as a young man he, "as the young often do," had "an acute sense of defilement, a hatred of the body" (SP, 22), and thus in much of his early poetry there is a violent discarding or debasing of the flesh. However, as he matured, as he grew intellectually and emotionally as a person and a poet, he learned to love the body, the flesh, and, indeed, was unable to, as the mystics are wont to do, sacrifice the flesh for the spirit: "In spite of the Christian, Muslim, Hindu mystics I still do not accept the notion of mortification of the flesh" (Box 28, folder 26). "For the body," he felt, even though he earnestly sought the reality of the soul/spirit, "should be cherished, a temple of God, some Christians say" (SP, 23). He wanted the reality of both the body and the spirit. As William J. Martz says, "Another way to state the paradox is that Roethke wants to be both in life and out of it at the same time."¹ Still, before his awareness of the beauty of the flesh, the greenhouses of his father were the only temple of God Roethke knew--"They were to me, I realize now, both heaven and hell, a kind of tropics created in the savage

climate of Michigan, where austere German-Americans turned their love of order and their terrifying efficiency into something truly beautiful" (SP, 8-9)--and the greenhouses were, prior to accepting, even rejoicing in, his own flesh, the temple to which he looked.

Disgusted with his imprisoning physical self, Roethke turned quite naturally to those things outside himself which were most familiar and yet most mysterious. Raised around the greenhouses of his father, Otto Roethke, a Prussian gardener, a harsh god among the flowers--"A florist does not woo the beautiful: / He potted plants as if he hated them. / What root of his ever denied its stem? / When flowers grew, their bloom extended him" ("Otto," CP, 224)--Roethke's early memories are of the flowers, roots, moss, bulbs, soil of his father's world, a world he could not share: "I'd stand upon my bed, a sleepless child / Watching the waking of my father's world.-- / O world so far away! O my lost world!" (CP, 225). Nevertheless, this was also a world he could not escape, and it was when he merged with this world, surrendered himself to its awesomeness and magic, that he began to recover his lost father and to discover himself as well. By the mid-forties he had been reading about mysticism for nearly ten years, reading Evelyn Underhill, Meister Eckhart, and others. Eckhart and other religious thinkers confirmed Roethke's feelings that all things are holy, wood and stone and all the rest of God's subhuman creations:

Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life. One could even put this theologically: St. Thomas says, "God is above all things by the excellence of His nature; nevertheless, He is in all things as causing the being of all things." Therefore, in calling upon the snail, I am calling, in a sense, upon God . . . (SP, 24-25)

And it was when Roethke focused his attentions on the subhuman beings of the greenhouse world of his father and his youth that he suddenly released his poetic imagination in a creative burst. Roethke was teaching at Bennington College, Vermont, and as Allan Seager related:

In 1944 Ted published one poem, "Night Crow"; in 1945, none. These were the years of gestation. . . . At last one day, Kenneth Burke came into Ted's rooms and Ted read him two of the "Greenhouse poems." "And I said, 'Boy, you've hit it.' And I kept demanding more. As far as I know Ted's gong struck then, when he hit that greenhouse line," Burke says. The next year, 1946, he published "Carnations," "Child on Top of a Greenhouse," "A Field of Light," "Flower Dump," "Forcing House," "Fruit Bin," "Moss Gathering," "Old Flgrist," and "Weed Puller." He had found his vein.²

What Roethke had found was illumination through otherness: by penetrating the world of the other, by reflecting upon, reacting to, becoming, and most of all loving the small and subhuman, Roethke could detach the self from the body and find a reality that eluded him elsewhere. Roethke perceived in the natural--the uncorrupted, the primitive--the presence of God, and according to Evelyn Underhill, "To 'see God in Nature,' to attain a radiant consciousness of the 'otherness' of natural things, is the simplest and commonest form of illumination."³

But subhuman creatures are not the only source of otherness. The beloved, too, can, ironically, free the self

from the body. Romantic love, the obsessive and erotic love of someone else, involves the losing of the self in another. The symbolism of romantic love is familiar to the mystic who sees God as the tireless lover of the soul: the beloved elicits desire--love--the essential motion that draws the self from the body, pulls the self toward another, as the soul is pulled toward God--"It is Love calling to love."⁴ As Underhill says, "Attraction, desire, and union as the fulfilment of desire; this is the way Life works, in the highest as in the lowest things. The mystic's outlook, indeed, is the lover's outlook."⁵

Subhuman creation and the beloved, then, are otherness, a form of illumination--the world outside the self that can lead to self-discovery, and can, as well, teach one about creation, its purpose, its end, its God. Again quoting Underhill, "The two eternal passions of the Self" are "desire of love and desire of knowledge."⁶ In otherness Roethke was able to satisfy to some degree both of these passions.

Roethke's first real exploration of otherness began with the greenhouse poems, published in The Lost Son and Other Poems (1948). It is interesting that the search for the self via the unconscious of The Lost Son sequence was simultaneous with the search for the self via subhuman creation in the greenhouse poems. The unconscious and subhuman creation are thus incontrovertibly linked in the quest for identity. Subhuman creation, in fact, like the unconscious, is a direct

route to the spiritual, and metaphorically represents the self pushing its way out of the dark into the light. Subhuman creation is, as well, a startling example of the will to survive, to struggle out of the mire and slime into the air and sunlight. The parallels between the self writhing out of the unconscious and the roots, stems, and tendrils winding out of the soil are obvious, as we saw in the sequence poems in the previous chapter, and brilliant. As Roethke remarks in a letter in 1942, " . . . there is a deep and abiding energy in all living things which can aid our human strength and contribute to our destiny. I don't think this is just mystical bunk; even the anthropologists seem to believe this" (SL, 97).

In the greenhouse Roethke found the perfect microcosm of life: "For death-into-life was the rhythm of the greenhouse,"⁷ and "A greenhouse is its own eternity" (SF, 99). The greenhouse poems, intriguing and sensuous, are a unique expression of life, what Kenneth Burke termed "vegetal radicalism." They are both violent and dark, tender and light; they encompass the microscopic and the monstrous; they capture primitive life with all its horrors, charms, and entangled secrets; and, they mirror the self as it thrashes desperately, pursuing salvation, straining for eternity.

"Cuttings" and "Cuttings (later)" demonstrate the transformation of the self into other, and thus the beginnings of illumination. "Cuttings" is a simple, straight-forward poem about the triumph of life, the subtle yet powerful will

to live:

Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,
 Their intricate stem-fur dries;
 But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;
 The small cells bulge;

One nub of growth
 Nudges a sand-crumble loose,
 Pokes through a musty sheath
 Its pale tendrillous horn.
 (CP, 37)

A small, quiet poem, "Cuttings" nevertheless magnifies the tiny, the unseen, and captures the sensuousness and the miracle of life. "Cuttings (later)" is much more personal and violent, as the protagonist has become the amputated victim struggling for new life:

This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
 Cut stems struggling to put down feet,
 What saint strained so much.
 Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
 In my veins, in my bones I feel it,--
 The small waters seeping upward,
 The tight grains parting at last.
 When sprouts break out,
 Slippery as fish,
 I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.
 (CP, 37)

Here the straining of the cut stems for life is the striving of the self to be reborn, to gain the light. The sexual implications cannot be overlooked either. Throughout Roethke's poetry stalks and stems are clearly phallic, and fish are often sperm, as they are in this poem, where they signal new life, regeneration, beginnings.

"Root Cellar," in spite of its belligerent, repulsive tone, is a paean not only to the tenacity of subhuman beings,

of roots and shoots and bulbs, but to the spirit in its relentless battle for realization:

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
 Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the
 dark,
 Shoots dangled and drooped,
 Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,
 Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical
 snakes.
 And what a congress of stinks!--
 Roots ripe as old bait,
 Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,
 Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery
 planks.
 Nothing would give up life:
 Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.
 (CP, 38)

The root cellar, like the unconscious, is a dark, unpleasant place where shapes and forms "may or may not be beautiful" (Box 28, folder 26). Still it holds the beauty of life, and it is from this loathesome pit that the bulbs, shoots, and roots will be transplanted and will later give bloom. The root cellar, then, is a place of hope. A stanza from an unpublished poem (c. 1946) reinforces this optimism:

Will I stretch out of wretchedness? Yes.
 Even these clumps wrapped in burlap stir
 Up hope; the last least parts of me strain
 When I see maimed roots grappling granitic stones.
 (SL, 118)

The root cellar, like "The Pit" in "The Lost Son," is the abyss of purgation, the second stage of mystical evolution, the forerunner to illumination.

"The Weed Puller" is also a poem about purgation. It is reminiscent of the Lost Son's return to the grave, then the womb to find himself and be reborn:

Under the concrete benches,
 Hacking at black hairy roots,--
 Those lewd monkey-tails hanging from drainholes,--
 Digging into the soft rubble underneath,
 Webs and weeds,
 Grubs and snails and sharp sticks,
 Or yanking tough fern-shapes,
 Coiled green and thick, like dripping smilax,
 Tugging all day at perverse life:
 The indignity of it!--
 With everything blooming above me,
 Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses,
 Whole fields lovely and inviolate,--
 Me down in that fetor of weeds,
 Crawling on all fours,
 Alive, in a slippery grave.
 (CP, 39)

Alive and tired of "Tugging all day at perverse life," the protagonist is alone and lonely, where the self-hatred and guilt he feels (here onanism equals death--and indignity) have condemned him to darkness. But in the last lines, the weed puller, the alienated and protesting protagonist, is coiled in the fetal position ready for rebirth. His "slippery grave" --"The garden is a grave" (SF, 103)--is paradoxically a life-giving womb, and he is ready to emerge from the slime.

The protagonist in "Moss-Gathering" is not bitter but saddened by his dark job:

To loosen with all ten fingers held wide and limber
 And lift up a patch, dark-green, the kind for lining
 cemetery baskets,

 That was moss-gathering.
 But something always went out of me when I dug loose
 those carpets
 Of green,
 As if I had broken the natural order of things in
 that swampland;
 Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast importance,
 By pulling off flesh from the living planet;
 As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of
 life, a desecration.
 (CP, 40)

The sweet empathy the protagonist feels not only for the mossy flesh he tears from the earth, but for all the tiny lives that are intertwined, for the entire natural world he has invaded and partially destroyed, is evidence of the protagonist's selflessness, of his spirit's being free from his own physical self. Like the mystic, the protagonist perceives in the moss more than just spongy growth: "The flowery garment of the world is for some mystics a medium of ineffable perception, a source of exalted joy, the veritable clothing of God."⁸ No wonder the protagonist feels mean, feels a violator of life and some vast order. Surely this poem supports, as well, Roethke's claim: "I have a genuine love of nature. It is not the least bit affected, but an integral and powerful part of my life. . . . I can sense the moods of nature almost instinctively. . . . A perception of nature--no matter how delicate, how subtle, how evanescent,--remains with me forever" (SP, 4).

Surely "Orchids" is proof of Roethke's keen perception of the delicate, the subtle, and the evanescent in nature:

They lean over the path,
Adder-mouthed,
Swaying close to the face,
Coming out, soft and deceptive,
Limp and damp, delicate as a young bird's tongue;
Their fluttery fledgling lips
Move slowly,
Drawing in the warm air.

And at night,
The faint moon falling through whitewashed glass,
The heat going down
So their musky smell comes even stronger,
Drifting down from their mossy cradles:

So many devouring infants!
 Soft luminescent fingers,
 Lips neither dead nor alive,
 Loose ghostly mouths
 Breathing.

(CP, 39)

Sensuous, mysterious, monstrous yet delicate--who, after reading this poem, can ever look at orchids again and see just flowers? The luscious, haunting, luring lips of these seductive creatures are unforgettable. Roethke, godlike, infuses them with a life and spirit only the privileged, the truly empathic can imagine, can know.

"Flower Dump" is another poem that expresses Roethke's closeness to nature:

Cannas shiny as slag,
 Slug-soft stems,
 Whole beds of bloom pitched on a pile,
 Carnations, verbenas, cosmos,
 Molds, weeds, dead leaves,
 Turned-over roots
 With bleached veins
 Twined like fine hair,
 Each clump in the shape of a pot;
 Everything limp
 But one tulip on top,
 One swaggering head
 Over the dying, the newly dead.

(CP, 43)

Besides alliteration, assonance, and rhythm, what keeps this from being a mere cataloguing of dead plants is the humanness of the lone tulip "newly dead." But the cataloguing itself is important, as Roethke explains: "We need the catalogue in our time. We need the eye close on the object, and the poem about the single incident--the animal, the child. We must permit poetry to extend consciousness as far, as deeply, as

particularly as it can, to recapture, in Stanley Kunitz's phrase, what it has lost to some extent to prose" (SP, 83).

So in "Forcing House" Roethke uses lists of particulars to recreate the immediacy and reality of life--of spirit--pumping through large and small alike:

Vines tougher than wrists
 And rubbery shoots,
 Scums, mildews, smuts along stems,
 Great cannas or delicate cyclamen tips,--
 All pulse with the knocking pipes
 That drip and sweat,
 Sweat and drip,
 Swelling the roots with steam and stench.
 Shooting up lime and dung and ground bones,--
 Fifty summers in motion at once,
 As the live heat billows from pipes and pots.
 (CP, 38)

The final greenhouse poem I want to examine briefly is "Transplanting." In this poem, as in "Cuttings (later)" and so many of the sequence poems, Roethke metaphorically captures the spirit's relationship to God in the flower's relationship to the sun, both spirit and flower ever straining upward toward the light, toward divine illumination. Here is the last stanza of "Transplanting":

The sun warming the fine loam,
 The young horns winding and unwinding,
 Creaking their thin spines,
 The underleaves, the smallest buds
 Breaking into nakedness,
 The blossoms extending
 Out into the sweet air,
 The whole flower extending outward,
 Stretching and reaching.
 (CP, 42)

The greenhouse poems have the power and splendor of unabashed awe at the beauty, the ugliness, the fragility, the

toughness of plants and flowers, roots and bulbs, smuts and molds--creatures with a real desire for life, forcing their way out of the dark, seeking the air and the light. By attending these creatures, crawling inside their dank cellars, penetrating their amputated beings, feeling their pulsing and breathing, apprehending their desire for life, for light, Roethke is transporting us into Otherness and telling us that fighting for life, seeking identity, aspiring toward illumination, toward God, should be the incessant ambition and devotion of every self.

There are as well two short poems in this volume that explore otherness. "The Return" is an almost surreally metaphorical meshing of the self with a dog, a cur--"I circled on leather paws"--as the protagonist faces himself--"And I lay down with my life"--in his cold, dark unconscious mind--"In the darkening corridor" and "in / That self-infected lair" (CP, 47). "The Minimal" is a delicious little poem praising small creatures from which most of us usually recoil:

I study the lives on a leaf: the little
 Sleepers, numb nudgers in cold dimensions,
 Beetles in caves, newts, stone-deaf fishes,
 Lice tethered to long limp subterranean weeds,
 Squirmers in bogs,
 And bacterial creepers
 Wriggling through wounds
 Like elvers in ponds,
 Their wan mouths kissing the warm sutures,
 Cleaning and caressing,
 Creeping and healing.

(CP, 50)

These subhuman beings do indeed seem holy, especially the kissing, healing bacteria. Too, we see, in Roethke's words,

"the relation between the visible and invisible reality . . ."
(SL, 114), a relation Roethke ceaselessly pursues.

Before examining additional poems which embrace otherness, both "The Waking" poems need mentioning, because as different as they are, they elucidate key concerns. The first, which is included in The Lost Son and Other Poems, demonstrates that otherness and oneness are almost inseparable, the former promoting the latter. The waking is the protagonist's realization of the communication among subhuman beings:

This way! This way!
The wren's throat shimmered,
Either to other,
The blossoms sang.

The stones sang,
The little ones did,
And flowers jumped
Like small goats.

A ragged fringe
Of daisies waved;
I wasn't alone
In a grove of apples.
(CP, 51)

The harmony among the small and the protagonist's inclusion in their world brings not only elation but a feeling of belongingness and union:

I came where the river
Ran over stones:
My ears knew
An early joy.

And all the waters
Of all the streams
Sang in my veins
That summer day.

Stones, flowers, birds, rivers appear again and again through-

out the poetry. For Roethke not only are they touchstones to another reality, but they are evidence of the interconnectedness of all things, all times, all places. Roethke's illumination is that of the mystic who is of the pure Franciscan spirit, and he "who feels," in Underhill's words, "with this intensity and closeness the bond of love which 'binds in one book the scattered leaves of all the universe,' dwells in a world unknown to other men. He pierces the veil of imperfection, and beholds Creation with the Creator's eye."⁹ Roethke's religiosity, then, involves more than trying to understand man's relationship to God: it concerns understanding man--the self--and the self's relationship to Nature, to all other creations living and dead, kinetic and inert, breathing and non-breathing, and their relationships to one another--which all leads to an understanding of God.

"Waking" to the mystic and to Roethke is rebirth--seeing the Truth, Reality--spiritual reality: "The true and definitely directed mystical life does and must open with that most actual, though indescribable phenomenon, the coming forth into consciousness of man's deeper, spiritual self, which ascetical and mystical writers of all ages have agreed to call Regeneration or Re-birth."¹⁰ "The Waking" that is the final poem of the volume bearing that title is a mystical villanelle of lingering simplicity and profundity. More than any single poem it expresses the mystic way to illumination, as well as identifies Roethke's position:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
 I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
 I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
 I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
 God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there.
 And learn by going where I have to go.
 (CP, 108)

This is, of course, only half of the poem, but these first three stanzas show sufficiently the sense of gradual illumination, of learning by living, by feeling, by being aware of all stimuli--internal ("I feel my fate" and "I hear my being dance") and external ("God bless the Ground!")--slowly, hypnotically, magnetically yet willingly, knowing the way: "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow." As Underhill says, "True Illumination, like all real and vital experience, consists rather in the breathing of a certain atmosphere, the living at certain levels of consciousness, than in the acquirement of specific information. It is, as it were, a resting-place upon 'the steep stair-way of love'; where the self turns and sees all about it a transfigured universe, radiant with that same Light Divine which nests in its own heart and leads it on."¹¹ Hence, "We think by feeling," a belief that is germane not only to the poem and its espousal of the natural, organic blossoming of illumination--"Great Nature has another thing to do / To you and me; so take the lively air, / And, lovely, learn by going where to go"--but to Roethke's identity both philosophically and poetically. Feeling rather than intellectualizing

is the essence of knowing--"I learn by going where I have to go"--of Being, of Becoming--"Being, which is above all, manifests itself as Becoming; as the dynamic omnipresent Word of life," according to Underhill¹²--and feeling is the essence of Roethke's belief in the natural world, the self, and God:

"Sense of the presence of God is [the] most consistent form of illumination" (Box 28, folder 26). And for Roethke sense of the presence of God is nowhere greater than in subhuman creation: "Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how? / The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair."

As Roethke says in "The Small," "I live / To woo the fearful small; / What moves in grass I love--" (CP, 148). The lowly, the small, the subhuman have perhaps nowhere been so wooed as in Roethke's poetry. And he asks, "why not?":

A snail, a slug, is to me a profoundly beautiful thing. I'll admit I can't pick up a snake and wind it round my neck, feeling its delicious coolness, etcetera--But Denise Levertov can, and I believe her. On the other hand, I remember stopping in California for a natural necessity, and there lo & behold in a path of stones was a coiled rattler: he didn't move; I didn't either. But I did feel, as God is my witness, a rush of love for that beautiful creature in the sunlight. (Box 28, folder 26)

Hence, Roethke wrote poems to creatures often considered vile and repulsive, and in these poems, as in "Snake," we sense the beauty of the much maligned and Roethke's sincerity:

I saw a young snake glide
Out of the mottled shade
And hang, limp on a stone:
A thin mouth, and a tongue
Stayed, in the still air.

It turned; it drew away;
 Its shadow bent in half;
 It quickened, and was gone.

I felt my slow blood warm.
 I longed to be that thing,
 The pure, sensuous form.

And I may be, some time.
 (CP, 150)

"Slug" is an even more moving, more personal poem exploring the complex relationship that time and incidents have developed between the protagonist and the slug. They began as friends:

How I loved one like you when I was little!--
 With his stripes of silver and his small house on
 his back,
 Making a slow journey around the well-curb.
 I longed to be like him, and was,
 In my way, close cousin
 To the dirt, my knees scrubbing
 The gravel, my nose wetter than his.
 (CP, 151)

How well Roethke elucidates not only the slug and the child, but their kinship, their naturalness, their similar states. But as an adult, the protagonist finds the slug an ugly nuisance--"loose toe from the old life, / . . . A fat, five-inch appendage / Creeping slowly over the wet grass, / Eating the heart out of my garden." The slug and the protagonist are enemies and the protagonist wages a fitful battle against the persistent creature:

And you refuse to die decently!--
 Flying upward through the knives of my lawnmower

 Until I'm scraping and scratching at you, on the
 doormat,
 The small dead pieces sticking under an instep;
 Or, poisoned, dragging a white skein of spittle over
 a path--

Finally, he resigns to his disgust at this creature that he can no longer love:

I'm sure I've been a toad, one time or another.
 With bats, weasels, worms--I rejoice in the kinship.
 Even the caterpillar I can love, and the various
 vermin.
 But as for you, most odious--
 Would Blake call you holy?

Whether Blake would call the slug holy or not is a moot point, but Roethke would and did, in spite of the leering ending of this poem. He is insistent: "Niehbuhr [sic] love a worm? Marianne Moore a better Christian, and a Presbyterian, could. It's one of the things we have to learn from Eastern thought. Everything, everything that lives is holy" (Box 28, folder 26).

Two of Roethke's most beautiful early poems are "The Heron" and "The Bat," the former subject often regarded as a gawky, peculiar bird, and the latter usually thought of with horror. But Roethke's heron is majestic--"He walks the shallow with an antic grace"--and "The wide wings flap but once to lift him up. / A single ripple starts from where he stood" (CP, 15). The bat is sweet--"His fingers make a hat about his head"--and brazen--"He loops in crazy figures half the night"--and familiar--he has "a human face" (CP, 16). The irony makes this poem unforgettable.

Some of Roethke's last poems are also devoted to often misunderstood or reviled creatures. "The Lizard" offers homage to that prehistoric reptile, of whom the protagonist says, "And his world and mine are the same, / The Mediterranean sun shining on us, equally," but who the protagonist acknowledges

is the rightful heir:

To whom does this terrace belong?
 With its limestone crumbling into fine greyish dust,
 Its bevy of bees, and its wind-beaten rickety sun-
 chairs.
 Not to me, but this lizard,
 Older than I, or the cockroach.
 (CP, 26)

Such humility is as refreshing as it is just.

"The Meadow Mouse" is a tender account of concern for
 a helpless baby mouse:

A little quaker, the whole body of him trembling,
 His absurd whiskers sticking out like a cartoon-
 mouse,
 His feet like small leaves,
 Little lizard-feet,
 Whitish and spread wide when he tried to struggle
 away,
 Wriggling like a miniscule puppy.
 (CP, 27)

The numerous similes relate the mouse, a usually unwelcome invader, to familiar pleasantries (although some may take exception to the lizard-feet), especially the wriggling puppy which few can resist. Thus, we empathize when the protagonist discovers the disappearance of his newfound charge--"Where has he gone, my meadow mouse, / My thumb of a child that nuzzled in my palm?--" and when he fears for the tiny fellow's safety since he is the prey of so many--hawk, owl, shrike, snake, tom-cat. This causes him to think of other small and/or vulnerable creatures--the nestling, the turtle, and most jarringly, "The paralytic stunned in the tub, and the water rising,-- / All things innocent, hapless, forsaken."

"The Thing" is about a similarly defenseless victim--a

tiny bird "--small as a lark"--being pursued by other birds:

Then the first bird
Struck;
Then another, another,
Until there was nothing left,
Not even feathers from so far away.
(CP, 32)

As momentarily captivated as the viewers of this slaughter are, they are also undisturbed, ironically, more concerned with their own tiny victims: "And we turned to our picnic / Of veal soaked in marsala and little larks arranged on a long platter." "Such is life," we are apt to reflect, the last line lingering in our minds: "And the blue air darkened." We are all predators and prey; our deaths are inevitable, only the means are unknown.

The means are apparent in "The Pike," where once again the focus is on the prey. The scene is idyllic, "A furred, a rocky pool," where peaceful creatures mingle:

The crabs tilt and eat, leisurely,
And the small fish lie, without shadow, motionless,
Or drift lazily in and out of the weeds,
The bottom-stones shimmer back their irregular stri-
ations,
And the half-sunken branch bends away from the gaz-
er's eye.
(CP, 33)

The protagonist is transfixed: "And I lean, almost into the water, / My eye always beyond the surface reflection; / I lean, and love these manifold shapes." But the serene scene explodes: "A thrashing-up of the whole pool, / The pike strikes." Roethke is cautioning us that even in the presence of love and peace and beauty, peril, though unseen, is never far away--we

are never out of its reach.

The peril in "The Geranium" is ostensibly the maid, but clearly the protagonist is the geranium's, and his own, worst enemy:

. . . she'd lived
So long on gin, bobbie pins, half-smoked cigars,
dead beer,
Her shriveled petals falling
On the faded carpet, the stale
Steak grease stuck to her fuzzy leaves.
(Dried-out, she creaked like a tulip.)

The things she endured!--
The dumb dames shrieking half the night
Or the two of us, alone, both seedy,
Me breathing booze at her,
She leaning out of her pot toward the window.
(CP, 228)

Not surprisingly, "that snuffling cretin of a maid / Threw her, pot and all, into the trash-can." The protagonist's reaction, although delayed, attests to the missed intimacy he shared with the geranium: "But I sacked the presumptuous hag the next week, / I was that lonely."

Each of these poems expresses the endearing emotional and spiritual attachment Roethke felt to "the lovely diminutive," an attachment that is probably nowhere more evident or better summarized than in "A Walk in Late Summer," where the protagonist cries:

Bring me the meek, for I would know their ways;
I am a connoisseur of midnight eyes.
The small! The small! I hear them singing clear
On the long banks, in the soft summer air.
(CP, 149)

Where he claims, "God's in that stone, or I am not a man!" And where he recognizes both his mortality and immortality:

"Body and soul transcend appearances / Before the caving-in
of all that is." Thus,

A late rose ravages the casual eye,
A blaze of being on a central stem.
It lies upon us to undo the lie
Of living merely in the realm of time.
Existence moves toward a certain end--
A thing all earthly lovers understand.
The dove's elaborate way of coming near
Reminds me I am dying with the year.

The rose, once again, is the symbol of the spirit that ever
"moves toward a certain end"--rising toward illumination, God.
But most important is the knowledge that living is not just
temporal existence, and that "all earthly lovers," that is,
those who love the earth as well as love on earth, are cogni-
zant of their spiritual lives. Certainly Roethke's emotional
and spiritual love of the earth and the earthly, of subhuman
creation, evokes at least in part the feeling that we have
for his poetry, his protagonist, and him.

Having looked at poems in which otherness, subhuman
creation, is solely and directly addressed, we need to survey
otherness when it is an integral part of longer poems in
which the journey out of the self is more complex, more tur-
bid, and in which otherness is only part of the process. Such
is the case in the sequence poems. Particularly in The Lost
Son and the Praise to the End! sequences the protagonist
calls upon subhuman beings to guide him out of his ignorance
and terror, to lead him to a spiritual reality.

In "The Flight" of "The Lost Son," then, the protago-
nist urges: "Snail, snail, glister me forward, / Bird, soft-

sigh me home, / Worm, be with me. / This is my hard time" (CP, 53). And in "The Pit" he queries, "Who stunned the dirt into noise?," and answers, "Ask the mole, he knows" (CP, 55). In "The Long Alley" the protagonist calls the flowers: "Come littlest, come tenderest, / Come whispering over the small waters, . . . Come, come out of the shade, the cool ways, . . ." (CP, 61). The protagonist actually embraces the subhuman in "A Field of Light," where he says, "Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone" and:

I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the kill-
deer,
The salt laughed and the stones;
The ferns had their ways, and the pulsing lizards,
And the new plants, still awkward in their soil,
The lovely diminutives.
(CP, 63)

The protagonist's adoration of "the lovely diminutives" brings him comfort as well as illumination--"I moved with the morning" (CP, 63). And in "Praise to the End!" the protagonist feels a communion with nature that opens him up to great joy:

Arch of air, my heart's original knock,
I'm awake all over:
I've crawled from the mire, alert as a saint or a
dog;
I know the back-stream's joy, and the stone's eter-
nal pulseless longing.
Felicity I cannot hoard.
(CP, 88)

He also discovers another reality:

I believe! I believe!--
In the sparrow, happy on gravel;
In the winter-wasp, pulsing its wings in the sun-
light;
I have been somewhere else; I remember the sea-faced
uncles.

I hear, clearly, the heart of another singing,
 Lighter than bells,
 Softer than water.

Suddenly there is a clarity to the world, a vitality of which he previously was unaware because he was lost in his own self-consciousness. So too in "Unfold! Unfold!" the protagonist cries: "Sing, sing, you symbols! All simple creatures, / All small shapes, willow-shy, / In the obscure haze, sing!" (CP, 90). And in "O, Thou Opening, O" the protagonist not only calls upon the small but becomes a happy, leaping frog: "Oh, what a webby wonder I am! / Swaying, would you believe, / Like a sapling tree, / Enough to please a cloud!" (CP, 98). Similarly, in "O Lull Me, Lull Me" the protagonist claims, "I'm crazed and graceless, / A winter-leaping frog" (CP, 83). "But," he realizes, "I can't go leaping alone." So:

For you, my pond,
 Rocking with small fish,
 I'm an otter with only one nose:
 I'm all ready to whistle;
 I'm more than when I was born;
 I could say hello to things;
 I could talk to a snail;
 I see what sings!
 What sings!

(CP, 84)

It is not enough to become another if the self still remains alone. The essence of otherness is love, loving something or someone else so totally that the self is transformed into that other being and together they become as one. This is, of course, the object of the soul--to become one with God.

While The Lost Son and the Praise to the End! sequences are the views of a young adult with his life still be-

fore him, in later sequences the protagonist is facing death. Like the younger protagonist, however, the old one is seeking identity, pursuing otherness, striving for illumination. So the dying woman in "Her Becoming," one of "The Meditations of an Old Woman," merges, as the title suggests, with the spiritual, with otherness:

The grandeur of a crazy one alone!--
By swoops of bird, by leaps of fish, I live.
My shadow steadies in a shifting stream;
I live in air; the long light is my home;
I dare caress the stones, the field my friend;
A light wind rises: I become the wind.
(CP, 107)

While she says she is alone, clearly she is not; she is in the company of the small, and finally she rises with the wind-- a peaceful spirit.

Similarly facing death, the contemplative protagonist in "Meditation at Oyster River," the second poem in North American Sequence, longs to be free of the self, to find comfort in otherness:

The self persists like a dying star,
In sleep, afraid, Death's face rises afresh,
Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt-lick,
The doe with its sloped shoulders loping across the
highway,
The young snake, poised in green leaves, waiting for
its fly,
The hummingbird, whirring from quince-blossom to
morning-glory--
With these I would be.

And with water: the waves coming forward, without
cessation, . . .
(CP, 190-91)

In these poems as in all of the sequence poems, be it flowing water, rising wind, leaping frogs, singing or winging birds,

winding tendrils, leaning flowers, reaching roots, the otherness that the protagonist seeks is always in motion, because motion is the way of the spirit, the way of love.

Roethke perceives the spirit in all God's creations, especially the small. One reason for this is his belief that everything that lives is holy. Another reason is perhaps best expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas, as quoted by Underhill: "As all the perfections of Creatures descend in order from God, who is the height of perfection, man should begin from the lower creatures and ascend by degree, and so advance to the knowledge of God."¹³ Thus Roethke also envisions the spirit in other forms--other degrees. A couple of poems in The Waking give quite a different configuration of the spirit.

In "The Visitant" the spirit is feminine, diaphanous, and Shelleyan. She is the object of the protagonist's love, the beloved:

She came without sound,
Without brushing the wet stones,
In the soft dark of early evening,
She came,
The wind in her hair,
The moon beginning.

3

I woke in the first of morning.
.....
Where's she now, I kept saying.
Where's she now, the mountain's downy girl?
(CP, 100-01)

The spirit--mysterious, elusive, sensuous, seductive--awakens the protagonist with the stirrings of desire, of love, but in his torpor she escapes him.

In "A Light Breather" the spirit is similarly ethereal, but not ephemeral; rather, she is like the swaying yet stationary rose in the seawind in "The Rose"--graceful, illusive, ambiguous, a pulsing presence:

The spirit moves,
Yet stays:
Stirs as a blossom stirs.
Still wet from its bud-sheath,
Slowly unfolding,
Turning in the light with its tendrils;
(CP, 101)

The spirit, "A small thing, / Singing," is self-contained, yet vibrating, emitting its presence to all things, "unafraid of what it is." But the spirit must be sought, must be consciously attended, like the small and silent, the often overlooked of the natural world--the snails and stones and blossoms.

So one must listen to the singing and the vibrations within oneself. Yearning after the beloved is really recognizing the desire--the love--within oneself, feeling one's own pulses and rhythms, moving, dancing to the music in one's mind and body. "Is that dance slowing in the mind of man/ That made him think the universe could hum?" (CP, 105) Roethke asks in "The Dance," the first of four poems that compose "Four for Sir John Davies." Singing, music, rhythm are everywhere, penetrating the body, the soul, the spirit, but the self is not always aware, not always listening, responding. These poems are an orchestrated progression from aloneness to togetherness to, albeit transitory, a spiritual oneness--to the flowing motions of flesh and spirit. The protagonist

hears and feels the music and declares that he needs "a place to sing, and dancing-room"; but after "romping with the bears," he realizes that "dancing all alone" he is no better than a caged bear--"this animal remembering to be gay." Still, he is "dancing-mad,"--"Between such animal and human heat / I find my self perplexed"--and his uncontrollable desire to dance drives him to seek a partner: "What is desire?-- / The impulse to make someone else complete?" He finds a scintillating partner--"That woman would set sodden straw on fire"--but then he wonders if he is just some insignificant instrument: "Was I the servant of a sovereign wish, / Or ladle rattling in an empty dish?" Their partnership awakens the rhythms within him--"My marrow beat as wildly as my pulse"--and he knows then that "we live beyond / Our outer skin" (CP, 106). Their pleasure stirs his inner self and spirit--"woke a ghost"--and they hear their own music--"O what lewd music crept into our ears." But there is danger in arousing the suppressed passion for another, danger of forgetting God: "The body and the soul know how to play / In that dark world where gods have lost their way" (CP, 106). So in the third poem, "The Wraith," "Incomprehensible gaiety and dread / Attended what we did." Fearful of their immortality, their short-lived happiness, the protagonist says, "We two, together, on a darkening day / Took arms against our own obscurity." They join each other inextricably, hoping for some assurance of existence from their love:

Did each become the other in that play?
 She laughed me out, and then she laughed me in;
 In the deep middle of ourselves we lay;

 Our souls looked forth, and the great day stood still.
 (CP, 106)

Although "The flesh can make the spirit visible," they awaken from their entranced dance unsure of whether they saw the spirit or not: "What shape leaped forward at the sensual cry?-- / Sea-beast or bird flung toward the ravaged shore? / Did space shake off an angel with a sigh?" (CP, 107). And in "The Vigil" the doubt remains: "All lovers live by longing, and endure: / Summon a vision and declare it pure." Unsure of the vision--"the visible obscures"--they nonetheless have each other--"still, we kissed"--and "Rapt, we leaned forth with what we could not see. / We danced to shining; mocked before the black / And shapeless night that made no answer back." The poem concludes:

The world is for the living. Who are they?
 We dared the dark to reach the white and warm.
 She was the wind when wind was in my way;
 Alive at noon, I perished in her form.
 Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall:
 The word outleaps the world, and light is all.

Questioning and enigmatic, Roethke offers no certain grasp on the spirit, but somehow one wants to answer that the living are the loving, the dancing, who move as one--"I perished in her form"--and experience at least momentarily "the white and warm." Though they only "rise from flesh to spirit" fleetingly, they know eternity, they know that "light is all."

Dancing is a physical, rhythmic response to chords

that are struck in the inner being. In "Four for Sir John Davies" dancing is more than just "commingled feet"; it is play and love making; it is two creatures rapt with the pleasures of one another, caught up in the motions, rhythms, pulses of their bodies and their spirits; it is illumination. Roethke is fond of the dance because at its best, when impulsive, primitive, the dance is not only illumination, but a celebration, a ritual to life and love.¹⁴ Perhaps Roethke's most well-known poem about love and dancing is "My Papa's Waltz," from The Lost Son and Other Poems. This short lyric reveals a young boy's adoration of his father, a rough--"You beat time on my head"--hard-working--"The hand that held my wrist / Was battered on one knuckle"--hard-drinking--"The whiskey on your breath / Could make a small boy dizzy"--man who found time to romp with his son before putting him to bed: "Then waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt" (CP, 45). For all the coarseness of the man, the son clearly cherishes these moments together, this awkward ritual of love, this momentary oneness with his father.

Ritual is important because it expresses outwardly what is felt inwardly. When Roethke was writing the greenhouse poems and The Lost Son sequence, he practiced a ritual of his own, as he explained to Allan Seager:

On days when he was not teaching [at Bennington College, Vermont], he moped around Shingle Cottage alone, scribbling lines in his notebooks, sometimes, he told me, drinking a lot as a deliberate stimulus (later he came to see alcohol as a depressant and used to curb his manic states), popping out of his

clothes, wandering around the cottage naked for a while, then dressing slowly, four or five times a day. There are some complex "birthday suit" meanings here, the ritual of starting clean like a baby, casting one's skin like a snake, and then donning the skin again. It was not exhibitionism. No one saw. It was all a kind of magic.¹⁵

Surely part of the magic was simply trying to understand his own body, to determine whether his body was a prison or a source of inspiration, a horror of flesh or a treasure of sensations. Surely, too, he was attempting to contact his spirit, to discover the rhythms and motions of brain and blood and breath. Thus, like the dance, such conscious behavior can become unconscious, entrancing, liberating, creative.

The ritual, the dance, is not always external, not always a physical leaping and bounding, dressing and undressing. In the contemplative North American Sequence the ritual and dance are both external and internal as the protagonist internalizes the rocking, swaying, undulating motions of the natural world to which he turns for guidance and solace. Longing for "A body with the motion of a soul" ("The Longing," CP, 188), at one point the protagonist sits on a rock and gazes into the river. Soon he feels within himself the motion of the water:

Now, in this waning of light,
I rock with the motion of morning;
.

Water's my will, and my way,
And the spirit runs, intermittently,
In and out of the small waves,
Runs with the intrepid shorebirds--
How graceful the small before danger!
(CP, 191-92)

Rocking in abeyance, he is momentarily, at least, all spirit. At another moment, driving across the great plains, the protagonist proclaims, "I rise and fall in the slow sea of a grassy plain," and,

I see the flower of all water, above and below me,
the never receding,
Moving, unmoving in a parched land, white in the
moonlight:
The soul at a still-stand,
At ease after rocking the flesh to sleep,
Petals and reflections of petals mixed on the sur-
face of a glassy pool,
And the waves flattening out when the fishermen
drag their nets over the stones.
(CP, 194)

The waves of the grassland, sea-like, immerse his thoughts, penetrate the rhythms of his mind and body, as they do later when he watches the sea itself: "My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves; / I lose and find myself in the long water; / I am gathered together once more; / I embrace the world" (CP, 198). Again the water reflects and embraces his thoughts, his spirit, his presence:

Silence of water above a sunken tree:
The pure serene of memory in one man,--
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world.
(CP, 201)

Finally, watching the swelling tide and a struggling rose in the sea-wind, he acknowledges, "Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire" (CP, 204). He realizes the motions of the world outside him and the motions of the world within him are one:

. . . I came upon the true ease of myself,
As if another man appeared out of the depths of my

being,
 And I stood outside myself,
 Beyond becoming and perishing,
 A something wholly other,
 As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,
 And yet was still.
 And I rejoiced in being what I was:
 (CP, 205)

Feeling the motions of water, wind, and rose, he feels his own motion, his love for the world and himself. He rocks in a dance of oneness, a ritual of joy within.

But Roethke's poetry is not always about man's relationship to Nature, to subhuman creation, to wind and water and rose. Roethke also had a great love of the human, and particularly in the love poems of Words for the Wind he presents the lover's outlook, a physical, emotional, and spiritual involvement with another, the beloved, the other, that leads to illumination. As Underhill say, "We must remember in the midst of our analysis, that the mystic life is a life of love . . . "¹⁶ Even though Roethke was not a true mystic, he believed "in the slow turning from knowledge to love" (Box 28, folder 26), in the organic growth of the self as a loving being. Love, of course, is a shared experience--"Who can surprise a thing / Or come to love alone?" Roethke asks ("The Other," CP, 130). Love is a natural motion, a reaching out for another, a yearning for someone or something outside the self, thus a selflessness; at the same time, love is self-discovering and self-fulfilling, as we see in "The Dream." The relationship between the protagonist and his lover is from the first organic and prophetic: "I met her as a blossom on

a stem / Before she ever breathed, and in that dream / The mind remembers from a deeper sleep: / Eye learned from eye, cold lip from sensual lip" (CP, 119). She is reminiscent of the spirit in "The Visitant," an ethereal, swaying vision-- "She came toward me in the flowing air, / A shape of change, encircled by its fire." Her very presence affects all the lives around her--"The bushes and the stones danced on and on"; "A bird sang from the center of a tree; / She loved the wind because the wind loved me." She teaches him that "Love is not love until love's vulnerable," and "She knew the grammar of least motion, she / Lent me one virtue, and I live thereby" (CP, 120). But mostly she teaches him to love:

She held her body steady in the wind;
Our shadows met, and slowly swung around;
She turned the field into a glittering sea;
I played in flame and water like a boy
And I swayed out beyond the white seafoam;
Like a wet log, I sang within a flame.
In that last while, eternity's confine,
I came to love, I came into my own.

The beloved, the other, in the love poems is an arresting creature, a creature of motion and sensuousness, of dalliance yet purity. As James McMichael says, "Of all the mediators on his journey out of the self, the woman is the most easily invoked. Like him, she is distinct from subhuman creation because she has a mind; and yet it is precisely that her body differs from his that he is attracted to her. She is beguilingly other, and as such Roethke conceives of and responds to her as if she has intimate traffic with the subhuman and inanimate otherness."¹⁷ In "She" the protagonist's lady

is sensual and alluring: "My lady laughs, delighting in what is"; "She lilts a low soft language"; "She cries out loud the soul's own secret joy; / She dances, and the ground bears her away" (CP, 129). Mindless, almost frivolous, she is a spirit awakening the protagonist to love--"We sing together; we sing mouth to mouth"--and life--"She knows the speech of light, and makes it plain / A lively thing can come to life again." She is rejuvenating. His dancing, his loving, partner, she penetrates his life with her rhythms:

I feel her presence in the common day,
In that slow dark that widens every eye.
She moves as water moves, and comes to me,
Stayed by what was and pulled by what would be.

The beloved in "All the Earth, All the Air" is similarly natural, innocent, yet evocative, but she is also more concrete:

All innocence and wit,
She keeps my wishes warm;
When, easy as a beast,
She steps along the street,
I start to leave myself.
(CP, 121)

She is both goddess--"But who, faced with her face, / Would not rejoice?" (CP, 117)--and whore--"easy as a beast." Spiritual and bestial, she fills him with the pleasure of his own existence: "This joy's my fall. I am!--" (CP, 121). And she leads him to conclude, "What's hell but a cold heart?" (CP, 122).

"Words for the Wind" is the longest, most complex, and most beautiful of the love poems. In it Roethke rein-

forces again and again the intercourse and kinship of all things, the living and the dead, the animate and the inanimate, the seen and unseen. All things come together in love: "Loving, I use the air / Most lovingly: I breathe"; "My brother the vine is glad"; "Sweet Phoebe, she's my theme: / She sways whenever I sway"; "I cried, and the birds came down / And made my song their own"; "The sun declares the earth; / The stones leap in the stream"; "And I walk with the wind" (CP, 123-24). But the focus of the poem is the beloved and her transforming of the protagonist into a loved and loving being:

She likes wherever I am.

Passion's enough to give
Shape to a random joy:
I cry delight: I know
The root, the core of a cry.
Swan-heart, arbutus-calm,
She moves when time is shy:
Love has a thing to do.
(CP, 124)

All things "Are part of what she is. / She wakes the ends of life" (CP, 126). She also wakes the protagonist. He understands what it means to be wise--"Wisdom, where is it found? -- / Those who embrace, believe"--and he understands what it means to be alive, to have lived for many years:

What time's my heart? I care.
I cherish what I have
Had of the temporal:
I am no longer young
But the winds and waters are;
What falls away will fall;
All things bring me to love.

All things bring him, thus, to his beloved:

She frolicks like a beast;
 And I dance round and round,
 A fond and foolish man,
 And see and suffer myself
 In another being, at last.
 (CP, 126)

The beloved is the heart of all of these poems. She is the spirit pulsing through all creation. She is as well, in Jungian terms, the protagonist's anima--his other self, his soul. And, his desire for his beloved is analogous to the soul's desire for God. As Bernard Holland remarks in his Introduction to Boehme's "Dialogues," "In a deep sense, the desire of the Spark of Life in the Soul to return to its Original Source is part of the longing desire of the universal Life for its own heart or centre."¹⁸ Thus, in "The Other" the protagonist asks, "What is she, while I live?-- / Who plagues me with her Shape, Is she what I become? / Is this my final Face? I find her every place" (CP, 130). And one cannot resist or control the motion of love--"I'm martyr to a motion not my own; / What's freedom for? To know eternity" ("I Knew a Woman," CP, 127). The beloved, the motion, is desire, the yearning of the self for fulfillment, for marriage, for union. As Roethke says in "The Manifestation," "What does what is should do needs nothing more. / The body moves, though slowly, toward desire. / We come to something without knowing why" (CP, 235). The body is drawn toward desire, toward earthly, fleshly love, as the soul is drawn toward God, divine love. For Roethke love is the Original Source, the Prime Mover, Eternity. So the lovers in "The

Tranced" come to immortality:

Our small souls hid from their small agonies,
 Yet it's the nature of all love to rise:
 Being, we came to be
 Part of eternity,
 And what died with us was the will to die.
 (CP, 237)

"The Motion" perhaps best epitomizes Roethke's views on the body, the soul, and love. "The soul has many motions, body one. / . . . By lust alone we keep the mind alive, / And grieve into the certainty of love" (CP, 243). Physical desire is a positive force propelling the self toward love, and "Love begets love. This torment is my joy." Love is a metamorphosis lifting the loved out of his physical self, his cocoon, releasing his spirit, his soul--the butterfly--with its rapt motion toward God. Still the problem remains:

Who but the loved know love's a faring-forth?
 Who's old enough to live?--a thing of earth
 Knowing how all things alter in the seed
 Until they reach this final certitude,
 This reach beyond this death, this act of love
 In which all creatures share, and thereby live, . . .

Clearly Roethke champions the power of love; it is the only hope for survival, for immortality--"O who would take the vision from the child?-- / O, motion O, our chance is still to be!" Love is deliverance from death of the self; it is the motion of life. Underhill quotes Boehme: "Desire is everything in Nature; does everything. Heaven is Nature filled with divine Life attracted by Desire."¹⁹

Roethke's religious quest, a quest for personal identity, for an understanding of the nature of creation and God,

led him initially to want to cast off the flesh, and with it the guilt and shame of fleshly desires. But his readings in mysticism, Eastern and Western, obviated his youthful negativism: "The truth would lie, I think, closer to the Bhagavad-Gita and the Buddha. The flesh need not be denied. One can die into another life without bullying on power: The 'I' or the ego--always the soft idiot softly me-ing--that 'I' must be broken beyond" (Box 28, folder 26). Roethke discovered that the way to get beyond the "I" was to merge with another, the other. Like the ambiguity of being in this life and out of it simultaneously, otherness embraces the ambiguity of being oneself while being another. Roethke first turned to the small and subhuman, whose naturalness and holiness attracted him. He recognized in subhuman creation the spontaneous, guilt-free existence he wanted for himself, for all selves. In his literary manuscripts Roethke copied a rather lengthy passage from Oscar Wilde's The Soul of Man under Socialism. Surely this passage appealed to Roethke because of his sympathy for Wilde's views:

It will be a marvellous thing--the true personality of man--when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it[,] it will still have, so rich will it be. It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they are [will be] different. And yet

while it will meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child. (Box 28, folder 26)

This glorious, harmonious personality--loving, innocent, natural, selfless, wise--is the self Roethke sought and found in otherness, in the tendril winding toward the light, the waters moving forward without cessation, the beloved awakening desire. Roethke perceived and felt an irresistible force, love, the motion and the music of the universe--the wind, the water, the rose swaying on its anchored stem, the desire of one creature for another. Roethke would agree I think with Meister Eckhart: "The best masters say the love wherewith we love is the Holy Spirit. Some deny it. But this is always true: all those motives by which we are moved to love, in these is nothing else than the Holy Spirit."²⁰ So too the Holy Spirit is in man if he is a creature moved by love. Love moves one outside the body freeing the self. Roethke's belief in the power and regeneration of love, his belief that love begets love, that love is, finally, immortality, eternity, filled him, as his poetry attests, with joy and optimism. He delighted in the wisdom of a pervasive, flowing love that moved and joined together all things, including the several selves, in a dance of oneness. Much of his poetry, as the next chapter shows, is a rejoicing in that ubiquitous union.

CHAPTER 4

ONENESS

The mystic knows his task to be the attainment of Being, Eternal Life, union with the One, the "return to the Father's heart": for the parable of the Prodigal Son is to him the history of the universe. This union is to be attained, first by cooperation in that Life which bears him up, in which he is immersed. He must become conscious of this "great life of All," merge himself in it, if he would find his way back whence he came. Vae soli. Hence there are really two distinct acts of "divine union," two distinct kinds of illumination involved in the Mystic Way: the dual character of the spiritual consciousness brings a dual responsibility in its train. First, there is the union with Life, with the World of Becoming; and parallel with it, the illumination by which the mystic "gazes upon a veritable world." Secondly, there is the union with Being, with the One: and the final, ineffable illumination of pure love which is called the "knowledge of God." It is through the development of the third factor, the free, creative "spirit," the scrap of Absolute Life which is the ground of his soul, that the mystic can (a) conceive and (b) accomplish these transcendent acts. Only Being can know Being: we "behold that which we are, and are that which we behold." But there is a spark in man's soul, say the mystics, which is real--which in fact is--and by its cultivation we may know reality.

This passage by Evelyn Underhill clarifies the evolutionary process of the Mystic Way, where the self awakens to otherness--the "great life of the All"--merges with that life, and comes to oneness, to "the union with Life, with the World of

Becoming." As she explains, oneness or "divine union" is two-fold. Roethke never averred to have reached the stage of Being, to know God. Indeed, in the essay "On 'Identity'" he states: "I can't claim that the soul, my soul, was absorbed in God. No, God for me still remains someone to be confronted, to be dueled with: that is perhaps my error, my sin of pride. But the oneness, Yes!" (SP, 26). Although for orthodox mystics oneness with life is simply one of the stages of illumination, for Roethke it is the final glory. Roethke did not accept the dissolution of the body. There are among mystics two views of Divine Reality--Emanation and Immanence. The doctrine of Emanation, according to Underhill, conceives the Absolute Godhead "as removed by a vast distance from the material world of sense."² Conversely, the doctrine of Immanence takes a more optimistic stance believing that "the quest of the Absolute is no long journey, but a realization of something which is implicit in the self and in the universe: an opening of the eyes of the soul upon the Reality in which it is bathed."³ For believers in Immanence, then, "earth is literally 'crammed with heaven.'"⁴ Clearly, Roethke was a believer in Immanence, and as such could not sanction the discounting of the earthly and the fleshly. Thus, Roethke chose the illuminative not the unitive life. Underhill clarifies well the difference between the two:

The real distinction between the Illuminative and the Unitive Life is that in Illumination the individuality of the subject--however profound his spiritual consciousness, however close his apparent

communion with the Infinite--remains separate and intact. His heightened apprehension of reality lights up rather than obliterates the rest of his life: and may even increase his power of dealing adequately with the accidents of normal existence.⁵

Roethke's poetry undoubtedly supports the illuminative life, as illumination enhances every aspect of life for him rather than drawing him toward a totally spiritual life in which the earthly, the fleshly, the sensual are cast off. As he says in "The Sententious Man," "Spirit and nature beat in one breast-bone" (CP, 131).

"The Sententious Man" is a good poem with which to begin examining oneness because its concern is the dual natures of the universe and man, and the need for oneness. The Sententious Man recognizes that often the spirit is overlooked as one succumbs to the passions of the flesh, especially in youth: "We did not fly the flesh. Who does, when young? / A fire leaps on itself: I know that flame. / . . . The spirit knows the flesh it must consume." But for Roethke the spirit must not devour the flesh. Rather, there must be a marriage of flesh and spirit, of temporal and spiritual:

Small waves repeat the mind's slow sensual play.
I stay alive, both in and out of time,
By listening to the spirit's smallest cry;
In the long night, I rest within her name--

Once again, motion is the key to this union: "But my least motion changed into a song, / And all dimensions quivered to one thing" (CP, 132). Motion--desire, love--brings togetherness, joy, freeing the self from self-consciousness and expanding awareness:

An exultation takes us outside life:
 I can delight in my own hardihood;
 I taste my sister when I kiss my wife;
 I drink good liquor when my luck is good.

Here the spirit and the flesh are both enjoyed, as both are good and true and beautiful--the link is insoluble. So, "I know the motion of the deepest stone. / Each one's himself, yet each one's everyone." Such knowledge is seminal to illumination; it is the apprehension of oneness. As Roethke comments in "On 'Identity,'" " . . . the 'oneness,' is, of course, the first stage in mystical illumination, an experience many men have had, and still have: the sense that all is one and one is all. This is inevitably accompanied by the loss of 'I,' the purely human ego, to another center, a sense of the absurdity of death, a return to a state of innocence" (SP, 26). The other center is the spirit. In oneness the several selves are joined, "the purely human ego" subsumed, the flesh and the spirit wed, "And the weak bridegroom [the flesh] strengthens in his bride [the spirit]" (CP, 132).

Oneness is an advancement beyond denial of the flesh; it means embracing the flesh as well as the spirit, seeing the two as one, as integral. As Underhill explains, oneness is the "all-round expansion of consciousness, with its dual power of knowing by communion the temporal and eternal, immanent and transcendent aspects of reality--the life of the All, vivid, flowing and changing, and the changeless, conditionless life of the One--." ⁶ This is the oneness Roethke seeks and proclaims in his poetry, although for him the One

is not God but life. Roethke's world, as John Vernon explains, is "the world of a schizophrenic who returns us to where we have always been, to the garden. Roethke's world is one in which objects are bodies, and the world and the body are one. It is a world in which this unity is filled out by time, and particularly by that aspect of time that unites falling and rising growth."⁷ Roethke's world is also a world of love and is united by the motions of love. Above all, love brings oneness. Again Underhill:

Attraction is a consciousness of the mutual desire existing between man's spirit and the Divine Spirit: of the link of love which knits up reality and draws all things to their home in God. This is the universal law on which all mysticism is based. . . . This "natural magnetism" then, once he is aware of it, will draw the pilgrim irresistibly along the road from the Many to the One.

To reiterate, for Roethke the Divine Spirit is in all things, and oneness for him is the union with All and in that sense the movement from "the Many to the One," the One being the totality of life, not God. Still, it is God's presence in all things that causes attraction, desire, love--the real motion of the universe.

"Love alters all. Unblood my instinct, love" (CP, 135), the protagonist urges in "The Renewal," a poem about the renewal of the self--a return to primitive nature--through love. The protagonist asks, "What glories would we? Motions of the soul?" To find the answers he seeks, as "the night wind rises" he induces a mystical trance, or at least a meditative state, wherein he concentrates upon the soul: "Dark

hangs upon the waters of the soul; / My flesh is breathing slower than a wall." Paradoxically, the flesh both imprisons --"a wall"--the spirit and frees it. While on the one hand the body prevents the spirit--"the soul"--from escaping the earthly, on the other the senses of the physical self--the instinct, the "five wits"--are the avenues of love--the feelers, as it were--that set the soul in motion, liberating it. Thus, he calls to love, and "These waters drowse me into sleep so kind / I walk as if my face would kiss the wind." In this sleep, which we now know is the awakening to another reality, the protagonist finds renewal and love:

Sudden renewal of the self--from where?
A raw ghost drinks the fluid in my spine;
I know I love, yet know not where I am;
I paw the dark, the shifting midnight air.
Will the self, lost, be found again? In form?
I walk the night to keep my five wits warm.

The commingled fear--the raw ghost, the lost self--and pleasure, love, emphasize the ambiguity and ambivalence of the quest for identity, for knowledge--fear for the flesh, pleasure in the spirit. But the disconcertedness is replaced by illumination:

Dry bones! Dry bones! I find my loving heart,
Illumination brought to such a pitch
I see the rubblestones begin to stretch
As if reality had split apart
And the whole motion of the soul lay bare:
I find that love, and I am everywhere.

Within the self he finds the love he seeks--illumination--and with it an expanded consciousness, "and the changeless, conditionless life of the One"--"I am everywhere." He finds

the glories he would have in the love, the motions, of the soul.

"Memory" examines the duality of life somewhat differently, less optimistically, revealing the transitoriness of illumination. The poem opens with the protagonist in a mystical state of love:

In the slow world of dream,
We breathe in unison.
The outside dies within,
And she knows all I am.
(CP, 141)

The poem begins in oneness, in mystical innerness--"The outside dies within"--but in the next stanza, the beloved is tentative: "She turns, as if to go, / Half-bird, half-animal." And even though the protagonist recognizes "Love's all. Love's all I know," in the end he is once again alone:

A doe drinks by a stream,
A doe and its fawn.
When I follow after them,
The grass changes to stone.

The dream is fleeting; the beloved--the doe--is unattainable. Love is the way to oneness, but suddenly the way is blocked; the protagonist is left loveless and singular. Only the memory of the spiritual remains. Interestingly, Roethke uses stone here in the conventional sense. Usually stones for Roethke are almost magical, certainly transcendental. They connect the self with the stars in "Unfold! Unfold!": "Speak to the stones, and the stars answer" (CP, 90). They join the self with another creature in "The Song": "Mouth upon mouth, we sang, / My lips pressed upon stone" (CP, 146). And,

And, they put the physical self in touch with the spiritual self in "The Pure Fury": "I touched the stones, and they had my own skin" (CP, 133). Stones are, as Karl Malkoff states, "Roethke's favorite object for the presentation of the Hermetic unity of the seen and unseen worlds."⁹ In "Memory," however, stone is obdurate, disconnecting, immutable, final.

More typically Roethkean, the stones in "The Tranced" "rang with light sound" (CP, 237). This is another poem about lovers and oneness, but this time union and illumination are more lasting:

Our eyes fixed on a point of light so fine
Subject and object sang and danced as one;
Slowly we moved between
The unseen and the seen,
Our bodies light, and lighted by the moon.

The lovers, in fact, rose to Being, and "we came to be / Part of eternity" (CP, 238).

"All Morning" is one of the most rapturous of Roethke's poems. Eternity and illumination abound in the glorious oneness of birds, birds lacing together all seasons, all lands, as they join harmoniously in the protagonist's yard:

It is neither spring nor summer: it is Always,
With towhees, finches, chickadees, California quail,
wood doves,
With wrens, sparrows, juncos, cedar waxwings, flick-
ers,
With Baltimore orioles, Michigan boblinks,
And those birds forever dead,
The passenger pigeon, the great auk, the Carolina
paraquet,
All birds remembered, O never forgotten!
All in my yard, of a perpetual Sunday,
All morning! All morning!
(CP, 235)

This "delirium of birds" is more than that, of course. It is

a choir of all singers--poets, bards--living and dead, a congress of all spirits, a shimmering collision of temporal and eternal.

"The Moment," presents another example of oneness:

Sound, silence sang as one.

All flowed: without, within;
Body met body, we
Created what's to be.
(CP, 238)

The path to oneness is not easy for these lovers: "We passed the ice of pain, / And came to a dark ravine." This poem has, as Roethke intended, "bleak terribleness" (SL, 259). But their love prevails: "The wide, the bleak abyss / Shifted with our slow kiss." And, "We end in joy." Through love they transcend pain and darkness and the temporal--"Space struggled with time"--and meet in eternity: "we sang with the sea."

"I Waited" is a more complicated poem. The journey to oneness lacks the catalyst of the beloved and the metaphor is one of ponderousness--a slow struggle through deep mown hay. But the moment of oneness is electrifying:

I saw all things through water, magnified,
And shimmering. The sun burned through a haze,
And I became all that I looked upon.
I dazzled in the dazzle of a stone.
(CP, 247)

The new reality, however, is short-lived. The protagonist turns from the water to continue his journey, "And when I walked, my feet seemed deep in sand." Still, he moves on, slowly uphill until he reaches a small plateau: "Below, the bright sea was, the level waves, / And all the winds came

toward me. I was glad." The way to illumination, as described in "The Moment," is not easy. "I Waited" reminds us that illumination, even partial illumination as herein related, takes great effort and perserverence, sincerity and tenacity. The way is often slow, dark, and frightening. Nonetheless, it is worth the struggle, the climb--"I was glad."

"Struggle" is a word Roethke uses frequently in both his poetry and his prose. The fight for life, for proof of existence, for self-hood and for loss of self--that is his subject, that is what Roethke wrestles with as both poet and man, and it is serious and dangerous business: "Love and death, the two themes I seem to be occupied with, I find are exhausting: you can't fool around, or just be 'witty,' once you are playing for keeps" (SL, 208). The mystic, too, as Underhill relates, sees his path, his devotion, as an interminable effort:

Over and over again the great mystics tell us, not how they speculated, but how they acted. To them, the transition from the life of sense to the life of spirit is a formidable undertaking, which demands effort and constancy. The paradoxical "quiet" of the contemplative is but the outward stillness essential to inward work. Their favourite symbols are those of action: battle, search, and pilgrimage.¹⁰

The "inward work" is Roethke's focus, and while the poems already discussed are often contemplative, the remainder of the poems I will examine are essentially so. "Contemplation installs a method of being and of knowing," Underhill quotes H. Delacroix: "Moreover, these two things tend at bottom to

become one. The mystic has more and more the impression of being that which he knows, and of knowing that which he is."¹¹

Being and knowing are the core of the contemplative North American Sequence. In each of the poems of this sequence the protagonist is in a state of Becoming. Facing landscape or waterscape he faces himself and casts back into the unconscious for signals and answers, for reassurance. In Chapter 2 we saw the quest for identity in these poems. Now we need to look at the illumination incurred. The sequence embodies a progression, a forward motion toward oneness, and there is a real sense of resolution and finality in the poems individually as well as as a unit. Each poem is more illuminative and more unitive than the previous one as the sequence evolves, spiralling to a climactic oneness.

"The Longing," the first poem, ends with the protagonist in his waning years about to embark on a quest of life as an explorer, a native American, a man close to the natural world:

Old men should be explorers?
I'll be an Indian.
Ogalala?
Iroquois.

(CP, 189)

"Meditation at Oyster River" shows the protagonist merging with otherness--water--that becomes oneness: "I rock with the motion of morning; / In the cradle of all that is, / . . . Water's my will, and my way . . . " (CP, 191). This oneness, of course, results in illumination: "In the first of

the moon, / All's a scattering, / A shining" (CP, 192).

"Journey to the Interior" presents a similar culmination:

On one side of silence there is no smile;
But when I breathe with the birds,
The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing,
And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my
sleep.

(CP, 195)

The key words in this passage are "breath," "becomes," and "begin." Breathing, becoming, and beginning are all important mystical concepts. Breath is one of the sheath-spheres of self in the Hindu religion, particularly in the Yoga of the Taittiriya Upaniṣads, as A. L. Herman explains in his commentary on The Bhagavad Gita:

Breath comes to be revered, treated like a divinity, worshipped and hailed as a power, a God in the universe. . . . for breath, or prana, is the sign of life[:] then breath is basic and essential to all life. It must have been an easy logical step from this rather commonly accepted truth to the doctrine that the secret of life and all living things is, truly, breath.¹²

The poetry indicates that breath is similarly viewed and revered by Roethke. Becoming, of course, is central to mystical doctrine--moving toward God, evolving spiritually, seeking Being. Beginning, too, is germane to the Mystical Way, wherein it is called rebirth or New Birth, and the new born is "the 'spiritual man,' capable of the spiritual vision and life, which was dissociated from the 'earthly man' adapted only to the natural life."¹³ The protagonist in "Journey to the Interior" is, then, experiencing partial illumination, a feeling of union with the birds, the spirit, even the dead.

In "The Long Waters" illumination is more complete. The final section is again a flowing sense of oneness and illumination:

I lose and find myself in the long water;
I am gathered together once more;
I embrace the world.
(CP, 198)

Here the protagonist attains the eternal, as he does in the next poem, "The Far Field."

The far field is eternity, just as the long waters are. Sitting, facing the sea, facing his death, the protagonist discovers infinity, eternity, within himself:

All finite things reveal infinitude:
The mountain with its singular bright shade
Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,
The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;
Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,
A scent beloved of bees;
Silence of water above a sunken tree:
The pure serene of memory in one man,--
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world.
(CP, 201)

The interrelatedness of everything, and the realization that "The pure serene of memory in one man" can capture that oneness, can trigger infinitude, is chilling and awesome, is illuminating.

The last poem of the sequence, "The Rose," is, as expected, the most illuminative. Paradoxically, it encompasses and extends the previous poems, bathing the sequence in light and oneness. Watching the tide--"ceaseless the action of the water" (SF, 132)--listening to the sounds and silence, rocking with the motion of All, the protagonist finds eternity,

enters that "pure serene of memory," "And gently the light enters the sleeping soul" (CP, 204). Finally focusing his attention only on the rose, that complex symbol that itself embraces all, the protagonist finds the joy of illumination:

Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched, wind-warped madronas,
Among the half-dead tree, I came upon the true ease of myself,
.....
And I rejoiced in being what I was:
(CP, 205)

He has become the rose, that symbol of spirituality, eternity, love, and God:

And [I rejoiced] in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
Gathering to itself sound and silence--
Mine and the sea-wind's.

He is in the illuminative state of oneness--at one with himself and his world.

North American Sequence is as majestic as it is mystical. The poems embrace a sustained state of contemplation, images, symbols, memories recurring and flowing back on themselves as the protagonist moves forward toward illumination. The way is not facile. Dislocation, relocation, circumlocution mark the protagonist's journey through the dark, uncharted recesses of his mind. But his heart leads him at last to peacefulness and joy, a new reality. Surely this sequence reflects Roethke's own journey and his goal all along as both poet and man. In "On 'Identity'" he remarks about the desires of some of the more sensitive young, but his comments

are directed at himself as well, for he had "a real hunger for a reality more than the immediate: a desire not only for a finality, for a consciousness beyond the mundane, but a desire for quietude, a desire for joy. . . . --a purity, a final innocence--the phrase is Mr. Spender's" (SP, 19). In North American Sequence Roethke achieves that final innocence: "Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire" (CP, 204).

The place of Roethke's desire, however, was not always beautiful. His life was a continuous wrestling with madness. Yearning for another reality, dogging the unknown--"always hunting resemblances, seeking correspondences, snatching for pieces of the supreme puzzle"¹⁴--Roethke ever teetered on the brink of the abyss, of real madness; and frequently he lost his balance: "I've been crawling in and out of hospitals the last three weeks," he wrote to Kenneth Burke in 1946. "For two weeks I was in the Albany Hospital taking some electric treatments. Mary Garrett and J. Jackson have been keeping track of me. Now I'm out in the country at some nursing home with a lot of old ladies. Am leaving tomorrow or the next day, I think" (SL, 117).

How much his mental illness affected his poetry is speculative at best. He did continue to write poetry while he was hospitalized, but any student of Roethke's work can see that the poetry was a conscious and consuming effort, not the untamed outpourings of a madman. Still, his poetry was not untouched by his illness, and vice versa. Both, after

all, incubated in this man. Some of his poems grew out of the terror of his illness, and although he took advantage of such experiences, he did not invite them, at least not after the first two episodes, which he claimed to have induced. As Allan Seager says,

some time--it is hard to say exactly when--after the fourth of his mental episodes [1953-54], he comprehended that these were not casual ditches, in which he happened to fall. He saw that the landscape in which he moved was full of ditches, and that, given certain pressures, even certain releases, he was bound to fall into them and be mired. Up until this time it had all been happenstance or an affair he could say he had arranged himself. Each episode might be the last and all together they had not represented an inevitable continuity, but now¹⁵ he understood. They were to be part of his life.

These interruptions in his life, of his teaching, troubled him. His life was a roller coaster of unpredictable highs and lows. His manic states did not so much confirm his belief in another reality, as they confirmed his horror of the abyss, for in these states he knew a real loss of self, loss of the temporal, and as he warned James Wright, former student and fellow poet: "I've been through all this before, through the wringer, bud, so please respect my advice. Once you become too hyper-active and lose too much sleep, you'll cross a threshold where chaos (and terror) ensues. And believe me, chum, it's always a chancey thing whether you get back or not" (SL, 220). True to his ambiguous nature, however, on separate occasions he wrote the following in his notebooks: "I am proud to suffer: to know I can and can make it something else";¹⁶ and, "I can't go on flying apart just

for those who want the benefit of a few verbal kicks. My God, do you know what poems like that cost? They're not written vicariously: they come out of actual suffering, real madness" (SF, 87).

Though mystics do not equate the abyss with madness, it is clear that Roethke equated madness with the abyss, with eternal darkness; hence his resistance to the two mystical steps beyond illumination--The Dark Night of the Soul and Ultimate Union. For mystics the abyss of the Divine Dark is part of Contemplation, as Underhill explains:

Contemplation is not, like meditation, one simple state, governed by one set of psychic conditions. . . . Some kinds of Contemplation are inextricably entwined with the phenomena of "intellectual vision" and "inward voices." In others we find what seems to be a development of the "Quiet": a state which the subject describes as a blank absorption, a darkness, or "contemplation in caligine." Sometimes the contemplative tells us that he passes through this darkness to the light: sometimes it seems to him that he stays forever in the "beneficent dark."¹⁷

Contemplation is brief union--not Ultimate Union, but a taste of that Union--with the Absolute. When contemplatives are asked about the knowledge of reality gained from such transitory oneness, according to Underhill their answers are contradictory: "They speak, almost in the same breath, of an exceeding joy, a Beatific Vision, an intense communion, and a 'loving sight,' and of an exceeding emptiness, a barren desert, an unfathomable Abyss, a nescience, a Divine Dark. Again and again these pairs of opposites occur in all first-hand descriptions of pure contemplation: Remoteness and Intimacy, Darkness

and light."¹⁸ So the abyss is psychic communication with God that simultaneously brings awareness of both His nearness and distance. When, then, in a number of later poems Roethke turns to the subject of the abyss, his intention, in spite of the association of the abyss with madness, is that of the mystic--communion with God. So the following definition from Underhill:

That Divine Dark, the Abyss of the Godhead, of which [the mystic] sometimes speaks as the goal of his quest, is just this Absolute, the Uncreated Light in which the Universe is bathed, and which--transcending, as it does, all human powers of expression --he can only describe to us as dark. But there is --must be--contact "in an intelligible where" between every individual self and this Supreme Self, this Ultimate. In the mystic¹⁹ this union is conscious, personal, complete.

Such is Roethke's aim in "The Abyss"; but while union is conscious and personal, it is not complete. Roethke does not move beyond the oneness of illumination, contrary to William Heyen's contention in his otherwise enlightening essay.²⁰ Although "The Abyss" is a five-part poem, thus conducive to the progression of the five mystical steps, I believe that it is solely about the abyss, the edge--that it supports Roethke's statement, "I practice at walking the void" (SF, 31). Hence, in the first section:

And the abyss? the abyss?
'The abyss you can't miss:
It's right where you are--
A step down the stair.'⁹

(CP, 219)

The abyss is only a step away. Thinking too of the propinquity of Roethke's illness, the implication is twofold. The

second section reaffirms this dual interpretation:

I have taken, too often, the dangerous path,
The vague, the arid,
Neither in nor out of this life.
(CP, 220)

In religious terms, of course, the protagonist is referring to his vacillation between the temporal and eternal, the seen and unseen. But it is difficult to ignore Roethke's inclusion of the personal here, his too frequent bouts with madness and the perilous suspension of self-hood during those times when he was literally "neither in nor out of this life." Now as the protagonist is once more on the verge of descent into the abyss, he asks for company: "Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues: / For the world invades me again, / . . . And the terrible hunger for objects quails me." He dreads releasing his grip on the temporal, on physical reality. He calls to Whitman whose catalogues he hopes will reinforce the reality he fears is slipping away. He sees himself as a furred caterpillar crawling down a string, "For I have moved closer to death, lived with death." He is not the caterpillar wrapped in his cocoon about to become, to be reborn as, a butterfly--a spiritual creature--but a caterpillar clinging to reality and moving downward toward some final death. Indeed, he concedes:

I'm no longer a bird dipping a beak into rippling
water
But a mole winding through earth,
A night-fishing otter.

No longer a singer, no longer a creature who sends ripples

around the world, the protagonist is immersed in earthly darkness, in physical rather than spiritual reality. And in the third section he tells us, "Too much reality can be a dazzle, a surfeit; / Too close immediacy an exhaustion." But it is also chastening, "strikes like a cold fire, So the abyss" (CP, 220-21). Roethke spent most of his life engrossed in the natural, the real, world. In that world he discovered the spiritual as well (surely, his is an immanent view--"The world . . . is immersed in God"²¹), and the experience, as his poetry attests, was dazzling, even over-powering, cleansing. He also spent a good deal of time lost in the abyss of manic depression. So, by extension, the protagonist is overwhelmed by the abyss--"A flash into the burning heart of the abominable." But he knows that the experience can be chastening and illuminating if he can just be patient, can endure: Yet if we wait, unafraid, beyond the fearful instant, / . . . The fire subsides into rings of water, / A sunlit silence."

The next section begins, "How can I dream except beyond this life?" The protagonist longs for altered reality, for earthly transcendence: "I envy the tendrils, their eyeless seeking, / The child's hand reaching into the coiled smile." He desires the innocence of fearless instinct, of motion without reason, without hesitation. In the abyss, "In this, my half-rest," the mind is unused, vacant: "Knowing slows for a moment, / And not-knowing enters, silent. / Bearing being itself." Clearly contemplation brings, at least

temporarily, another reality, a state in which "the fire dances / To the stream's / Flowing," a state wherein the violent fire of the abyss--the searing darkness--is mesmerized by the motion of eternity; they join in celebration. But the protagonist questions the direction of this motion: "Do we move toward God, or merely another condition?" Is the abyss really the Divine Dark or just the absence of known reality? Unsure, the protagonist adopts a passive willfulness:

I rock between dark and dark,
My soul nearly my own,
My dead selves singing.
And I embrace this calm--
.
A luminous stillness.

This section ends with the shade--death? hell?--speaking:

'Adore and draw near.
Who knows this--
Knows all.'

(CP, 222)

Roethke suggests the ambiguity of the abyss: Is it the way to God or the way to the devil? Death provides the only answer, and while Roethke courts death, tightrope-walks the edge of the abyss, follows the dangerous path of madness too often, he cannot commit himself to death. Thus in the last section he steps back from the abyss to the natural world, the world of illumination--"I hear the flowers drinking in their light"--and he merges "like the bird, with the bright air." He rejects the dark, the not-knowing, "And my thought flies to the place by the bo-tree." He seeks enlightenment, awakening from the darkness. The poem ends, "Being, not doing, is my first

joy." Clearly the protagonist is rejoicing in his own existence, the self, the I AM, not in being one with God. Thus, he has not entered the abyss, has not annihilated the self, has not succeeded to the Unitive Way. "The Abyss," then, is a poem of illumination, of affirmation of the self. While that is already a great deal, the poem is something more: "It ["The Abyss"] damned near killed me to do. This dueling with God gets exhausting" (SL, 248).

Nevertheless, Roethke continues his struggle with the self and with God. He pursues the apprehension of God again in the mystical "In a Dark time," that in his words "was a dictated poem, something given, scarcely mine at all."²² The poem is so thoroughly and well discussed by Roethke and others in Anthony Ostroff's The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic that I simply want to remark on a couple of relevant points. The second stanza reaffirms the connection between madness and the abyss:

What's madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!
I know the purity of pure despair,
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
That place among the rocks--is it a cave,
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.
(CP, 239)

Again ambiguity of the abyss is evident: is it a dead end in the dark--a cave? Or, is it the way to God--a winding path? The only way to find out is to give up the edge and plunge into the abyss: "A man goes far to find out what he is-- / Death of the self in a long, tearless night." The willful

dissolution of the self is the protagonist's intention: "Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire." But in the next breath he compares his soul to "some heat-maddened summer fly," some filthy, crazed, and persistent pest. Thus he queries, "Which I is I?" The certainty is still not there. The protagonist is torn between flesh and spirit, but suddenly he declares, "I climb out of my fear. / The mind enters itself, and God the mind, / And one is One, free in the tearing wind." A quick, ungraspable conversion? Some of Roethke's critics have thought so,²³ but, like Babette Deutsch, "I find [these lines] wholly acceptable."²⁴ Even though Roethke says that "presumably, in the poem, the self dies, for a time at least,"²⁵ the self that dies is not the body. In leaping to oneness Roethke's protagonist is bounding off the edge, risking the abyss, but not death. The oneness is in the mind--reason is displaced, the rational self destroyed, but the flesh is not defiled. Of this transcendence Roethke comments: "This is no jump for the timid, no flick from the occult, no moment in the rose garden. Instead it is a cry from the mire, and may be the devil's own."²⁶ The protagonist chances madness for union with God, not knowing whether madness is the avenue to God or the devil. The ambiguity is clear in "free in the tearing wind." The wind is destructive: "God Himself, in his most supreme manifestation, risks being maimed, if not destroyed."²⁷ Surely this is not the championing of the abyss by mystics such as Ruysbroeck,²⁸ but the terror of uncertainty

beyond illumination. Roethke is never convinced, nor convincing, when it comes to The Dark Night of the Soul and/or Ultimate Union.

Roethke continues his "drive toward God"²⁹ in other poems of Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical, of which "In a Dark Time" is the first. The protagonist of "In Evening Air" is facing death ("I stand by a low fire") and he seeks assurance of his immortality from God: "Make me, O Lord, a last, a simple thing / Time cannot overwhelm" (CP, 240). His life has been spent trying to establish self-hood: "Who would be half possessed / By his own nakedness?" Now, as he embraces the night that embraces him, he sees "in evening air, / How slowly dark comes down on what we do." As in "The Waking," "Waking's my care--" and the dark brings sleep, death, which promises a new awakening, a new reality.

"The Sequel" is also about death and rebirth into a new reality. The protagonist wasted his life in aimless pursuit of his passions; now he wonders, "Whom do we love? I thought I knew the truth; / Of grief I died, but no one knew my death" (CP, 241). He awakens to "a body dancing in the wind, / A shape called up out of my natural mind." He enters the world of the other--nestling, partridge, minnow--and comes to oneness:

We danced, we danced, under a dancing moon;
And on the coming of the outrageous dawn,
We danced together, we danced on and on.

"The outrageous dawn" is rebirth into a transcendent state--

"Morning's a motion in a happy mind"--where the spiritual self, as in the love poems of Words for the Wind, is partly the anima--"She left my body, lighter than a seed; / I gave her body full and grave farewell." The spirit is released, free in the wind--not the tearing wind this time--"she swayed away / To the dark beginnings of another day." This haunting last line is also found in the notebooks where Roethke clarifies it: "For the madman there is no awakening to a new day: the new day is worse than before, or merely the dark beginnings of another day" (SF, 120). Once again loss of the rational self, entry into the abyss, is not an easy road for Roethke. So the protagonist, still struggling with his identity--"Leaves, leaves, lean forth and tell me what I am"--sees himself as a man intermittently trapped by madness: "I am a man, a man at intervals / Pacing a room, a room with dead-white walls" (CP, 242). Because he cannot bring himself to long for the abyss, for Ultimate Union and complete loss of self, he believes eternity is lost to him: "I feel the autumn fail--all that slow fire / Denied in me, who has denied desire." If the abyss is the sequel to earthly reality, if madness is the forerunner to transcendence, to the spiritual leap, the eternal flame, Roethke cannot--will not--pursue it. He refuses to go beyond the Illuminative Way; he loves the earthly, the fleshly, the natural world too much to deny it.

In "Infirmity," however, Roethke takes a different view of the flesh. Paradoxical, a web of opposites, the ten-

sion of this poem is created by the several selves as they struggle for survival while the protagonist is resigned to be "son and father of my only death" (CP, 244). The poem opens with the narcissistic protagonist staring at himself in a deepening pool: "I stare . . . And tell myself my image cannot die. / I love myself: that's my one constancy." Still, he is not content to be himself alone: "Oh, to be something else, yet still to be!" In fact, infirm ("my meager flesh breaks down"), he is ready to dismiss his fleshly self: "Sweet Christ, rejoice in my infirmity; / There's little left I care to call my own." His dying body, his aging flesh, no longer pleases him, but, "The soul delights in that extremity." The battle between the body and soul is clear. And true to the ambiguity of the poem, the resigned protagonist notes, "Blessed the meek; they shall inherit wrath." From a mystical viewpoint, surely Roethke is suggesting that he who relinquishes the body, the temporal, shall be blessed with the soul, the spiritual. Thus one should not, in Dylan Thomas' famous words, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light,"³⁰ light, of course, being the temporal and not the eternal. Indeed, for the mystic "The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal"--God is the great pursuer of the soul. So the protagonist accepts the finality of his earthly existence: "Dead to myself, and all I hold most dear, / I move beyond the reach of wind and fire." Ironically, he transcends the natural world, "the lives / I've come to love." With unfamiliar con-

fidence, even temerity, the protagonist declares, "My soul is still my soul, and still the Son, / And knowing this, I am not yet undone." This certitude, however, comes with a warning: "Eternity's not easily come by." In a twist of opposites, the protagonist must adjust: "I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see / How body from spirit slowly does unwind / Until we are pure spirit at the end." The shift from I to we, like the synaesthetic reversing of the senses, reveals an altered consciousness, a shift in perspective from the sole central ego to the collective organs of the senses, the physical receivers that too will become spirit. Perhaps, as well, the I to we implies that the several selves are united at last, but surely the body is not included, and the mind is all but discarded as well: "A mind too active is not a mind at all." The call is for passivity, for stillness. This is not an unfamiliar summons: Roethke has all along denied reason and courted the heart, and "still" and "stillness" are prevalent appeals, although motion, paradoxically, is the way of the soul--thus the rose stays yet sways, as we have seen, combining the temporal and eternal. Infirmary, then, brings death and spiritual rebirth. Unlike earlier poems where the protagonist was so firmly embedded in his flesh that the struggle was to shed his "epidermal dress" and flee into the mind, the unconscious, and from thence to discover the soul, in this poem the protagonist is ready to trade his cortisone injections for spiritual resurrection. He seems to have no qualms

about leaving the body behind. The protagonist successfully makes the leap of faith, escapes the temporal and rises in transcendent oneness.

The next poem in the sequence, "The Decision," also accepts the mortification of the flesh, although less gloriously. The protagonist asks, "What shakes the eye but the invisible?" (CP, 245). Roethke's poetry has been until now a testament to the wonder of the visible, the natural world, while insisting that the visible reveals the invisible, that "God's in that stone, or I am not a man!" (CP, 149). Now he sees his focus on the natural world as a retreating from God: "Running from God's the longest race of all." In his manuscripts, however, Roethke counters, "But the running from may be a running toward. How do we know? This is related to Yeats' 'Hatred of God can bring the soul to God'" (Box 28, folder 26). At any rate, the protagonist in "The Decision" does not run away. He sees that the final truth is inescapable, death is inevitable. Eternity is uncertain, though, so he hesitates, cries out, but he proceeds to meet his fate:

Which is the way? I cry to the dread black,
The shifting shade, the cinders at my back.
Which is the way? I ask, and turn to go,
As a man turns to face on-coming snow.

This protagonist's encounter with the eternal is much more ominous than that of the protagonist of "Infirmity."

"The Marrow" is the last of the poems of this sequence to brood on God and death and the abyss. The natural world no longer holds for the protagonist the promise of knowing:

The wind from off the sea says nothing new.
 The mist above me sings with its small flies.
 From a burnt pine the sharp speech of a crow
 Tells me my drinking breeds a will to die.
 (CP, 246)

The protagonist's desire for Truth, for God, leads him to the perilous edge--"One look too close can take my soul away." But, "Brooding on God, I may become a man." There is still no certainty, but contemplation offers hope of identity. When the protagonist cries, "What burns me now? Desire, desire, desire," he is not speaking of fleshly desire but of love in the mystical sense--the soul crying out to God. Thus he asks, "Godhead above my God, are you there still?" The distinction that Roethke makes here between his God and the Godhead is important. The Godhead, of course, is the Absolute. Roethke's God, as we have seen, is more accessible, is everywhere, in stone and plant and slug and lover, in the self. Now he feels the need to communicate with the Godhead. He knows that he must sleep to awaken--"To sleep is all my life"--that he must die and be new born to fulfill his desire. Still, he dreads the Unitive Way: "Lord, hear me out, and hear me out this day: / From me to Thee's a long and terrible way." But in the final stanza the protagonist surrenders to the "terrible way": "I bleed my bones, their marrow to bestow / Upon that God who knows what I would know." This is the bleakest of Roethke's poems. Like "Infirmity" and "The Decision," "The Marrow" presents the protagonist as willing to annihilate the self, to take the abyss in order to know

"what I would know." However, in the last poems of this sequence, Roethke turns from the abyss and once more rejoices in illumination, and the oneness therein, rather than continuing to strive for Ultimate Union.

"The Tree, The Bird" is a return to the motion, the love, of the resplendent natural world. The protagonist is surrounded by a world desirous of communion with him:

Uprose, uprose, the stony fields uprose,
And every snail dipped toward me its pure horn.
The sweet light met me as I walked toward
A small voice calling from a drifting cloud.
(CP, 248)

Reminiscent of the once self-delighting Old Lady (CP, 103), the protagonist is "At ease with joy, a self-enchanted man." This is a telling statement. Roethke's grappling with the Divine Dark, his effort to convince himself that the pain of the abyss was requisite to Ultimate Joy, is here denounced. He has concluded for himself that the joy of illumination is not only real but also comfortable, that he need not purge the pleasure he finds in the natural world, in the self. Thus, although the protagonist nears death, he does not dwell on the abyss but relishes his remaining temporal life with a release, a jubilation, an elevation higher and purer than ever before:

The present falls, the present falls away;
How pure the motion of the rising day,
The white sea widening on a farther shore.
The bird, the beating bird, extending wings--.
Thus I endure this last pure stretch of joy,
The dire dimension of a final thing.

With familiar ambiguity and paradox, the temporal is transcended and eternity, "the white sea widening," awaits the pro-

tagonist after he endures "the dire dimension" of joy.

Equally ambiguous and paradoxical, "The Right Thing" is nonetheless a more positive, more optimistic poem. The protagonist is not interested in knowing ("Let others probe the mystery if they can" [CP, 250]); he is content to be, to bask in the perfect arrangement, the grand plan of life:

God bless the roots!--Body and soul are one!
The small become the great, the great the small;
The right thing happens to the happy man.

As death approaches, the happy man--the man who has surrendered his will to God--"Takes to himself what mystery he can," and unthreatened, unworried, he dies happily.

The last poem of the sequence, and of The Far Field, "Once More, the Round," is Roethke's most rousing hymn to oneness and the self:

Now I adore my life
With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,
With the Fish, the questing Snail,
And the Eye altering all;
And I dance with William Blake
For love, for Love's sake;

And everything comes to One,
As we dance on, dance on.
(CP, 251)

This celebration of the self, of the small, of kinship with Blake--of those who taught him love, showed him love, enabled him to love and be loved--is certainly one of the high points of Roethke's poetry and a fitting ending to his final volume. The dance of oneness becomes a lingering emblem of Roethke's work--the crowning ritual of illumination, of merging with the "great life of the All."³¹

Oneness is the incessant chant of Roethke's poetry. As we have seen, in order to know oneness, the self must know separateness, and in order to know illumination, the self must know darkness. Most of Roethke's poems, his visions, are therefore ambiguous, paradoxical, embracing opposites. So it is that many of the poems exulting in oneness also linger on the perilous edge, or even plunge dramatically, for a time at least, into the abyss, the step in the Mystical Way after illumination that is, to reiterate, "the final and complete purification of the Self, which is called by some contemplatives the 'mystic pain' or 'mystic death,' by others the Purification of the Spirit or Dark Night of the Soul."³² Since the abyss is the complete loss of self, Roethke ultimately retreats from it. To him it is madness, poetically and literally, personally, and he stubbornly refuses to release his grip on illumination and the ensuing oneness: "This experience [oneness] has come to me so many times, in so many varying circumstances, that I cannot suspect its validity: it is not one of the devil's traps, an hallucination, a voice, a snare" (SP, 26). Roethke could not say the same for the abyss, the unknown, the Dark Night of the Soul where "the purifying process is extended to the very centre of I-hood, the will."³³ Underhill continues:

The human instinct for personal happiness must be killed. This is the "spiritual crucifixion" so often described by the mystics: the great desolation in which the soul seems abandoned by the Divine. The Self now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely. It desires nothing, asks nothing, is utterly passive, and is thus prepared for Union.

Passivity, devoured individuality, excised personal happiness, these were not for Roethke, advocate of love and joy-- "In joy recovered innocence again" (Box 28, folder 26). In spite of earnest attempts to surpass the oneness of life and merge with the Absolute, Roethke remained true to the self, a "sin of pride" to some perhaps, but a conscious philosophical and artistic choice that makes Roethke one of the genuine and great heralders of life--All Life--a rather unique position in the modern age of rampant cynicism, skepticism, and agnosticism.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Have I become a spiritual man?
To this dark place I've come, and come again
As if led by my nose . . .
A bald two-legged hound
Sniffing the mouldy ground
In a blind search.

(SF, 140)

The search for self, for Truth, for God must always be blind, for it is the archetypal quest of the unknowing for the unknown. Mystics believe that God embraces all knowledge, all light; the way to God is ever, thus, a groping in the dark:

. . . God in His absolute Reality is unknowable--is dark--to man's intellect: which is, as Bergson has reminded us, adapted to other purposes than those of divine intuition. When, under this spur of mystic love, the whole personality of man comes into contact with that Reality, it enters a plane of experience to which none of the categories of intellect apply [sic]. Reason finds itself, in a most actual sense, "in the dark"--immersed in the Cloud of Unknowing.¹

"Perhaps," as Roethke notes, "we should say: God is here, but we are outside Him" (Box 28, folder 26). In any case, Roethke did return repeatedly to the dark; he did follow his instincts, sharpened by mystical thought, like a bloodhound. Whether or not he became a spiritual man is, I suppose, an unanswerable

question, or one that only Roethke could answer, and he seemed reluctant to make such a pronouncement. After all, he was a poet and teacher, and no matter how visceral his approach, these are intellectual pursuits. (Not that a spiritual man must necessarily be exclusively so, but a true mystic would.) Nonetheless, Roethke's quest was religious, was spiritual. As mystics do, he longed for a heightened consciousness, a reality beyond the earthly and temporal.

His search, as we have seen, began with the self, and appropriately so, for the self is the receiver through which we perceive and know the world around us. "The sphere of our possible intellectual knowledge," as Underhill reminds us, "is thus strictly conditioned by the limits of our own personality. On this basis, not the ends of the earth, but the termini of our own sensory nerves, are the termini of our explorations: and to 'know oneself' is really to know one's universe."² Critics of Roethke's persistent self-focus should bear this in mind. If Roethke seems preoccupied with his own identity it is because he was aware that the way to any knowledge, any certitude, is--must be--the self. And Roethke was willing to abuse himself in order to find the answers he relentlessly sought. Thus, he constantly pushed himself to the brink, and sometimes fell in:

For you see I have gone to the edge of my extent,
The fringe of my worst delight,
Bedunged, beslimed, bedevilled and bedamned.
(SF, 130)

The nascent self, then, is the starting point of

Roethke's ardent quest. His first poems, as are the first poems of most young poets, are constrained by conventional forms and rhythms. But even there he is on the track of the spiritual and aware that he must cast off the physical and dig more deeply into the mind, the unconscious self, if he is to discover the truths of life, discover the soul, discover God.

I ask a question of the supernatural.
At what point does the self become the soul
When it deserts this clumsy animal,
This bear-like shape that lumbers down a hall
Or clambers up a hill?

(SF, 141)

This and other questions Roethke found were not easily answered. He had to journey far into the dark of the self and the natural world to reach the supernatural and acquire answers. His probing began in earnest when he remembered the greenhouse of his youth.

Turning to the greenhouse--"a reality harsher than reality" (SF, 150)--Roethke confronted his past: his fathers ("A son has many fathers" [CP, 98]), blood, literary, and spiritual, and his childhood, replete with the swelling seeds of guilt as well as the joy of innocence. The past was an important wellspring for Roethke. Contrary to "Mondrian's notion that we must destroy particular form," Roethke insisted:

We don't destroy: we must absorb the past, the conventional, if you will, before we break everything up. The past must be taken into ourselves. We must absorb as much of the past as we can, as much of the irrational as we can. It's part of our equipment. . .
(Box 28, folder 26)

Certainly the past is an important part of Roethke's life and work. The Lost Son and Other Poems, Praise to the End!, and The Far Field are volumes in which Roethke particularly re-searches the past, via the unconscious, the irrational, and absorbs the past into the self. Besides the past, the greenhouse provided Roethke with the perfect metaphor for the irony and ambiguity that is life and Life, temporal and eternal--the plant world. Plants, "Growing both ways at once, / Alive in the light, in the dark . . ." (SF, 36), are wonderfully representative of the "urge and wrestle" of the soul, the spirit lodged in the body but seeking transcendence in God--"A body with the motion of the soul" (CP, 188).

While the greenhouse itself, that microcosm of heaven and hell, is a symbol that does not persist throughout Roethke's work, the subhuman beings, that for the most part were first encountered there, do. The subhuman beings develop into a symbolic language that unifies the poetry. They are, as well, one of the keys to otherness, a transcendent state that for Roethke, and many mystics, is central to the apprehension of the self, love, and God. By projecting the self into otherness, becoming subhuman creation--stone or slug or snail or rose--the self temporarily leaps to a heightened consciousness, another perspective, another reality. In order to achieve otherness the self must love these other creatures with an intensity that diminishes the self as it augments awareness of another presence, as it becomes another. Thence comes

self-love and love of life--"To love objects is to love life" (SF, 19).

Love is the essence of life, of understanding ("To know and to love: the same thing" [SF, 44]), of Roethke's poetry. In the love poems of Words for the Wind Roethke specifically relates romantic--erotic, sexual--love with spiritual love, something mystics, Eckhart for one, and other religionists (Christian terminology, for example, holds that the church is the bride of Christ) are wont to do. Love is a way out of the self, a rapturous alteration of consciousness that substantiates being: "This joy's my fall, I am!--" (CP, 121). So Roethke asks in "On 'Identity,'" "Can we say this: that the self can be found in love, in human, mutual love, in work that one loves--not in arbeit in the German sense?" (SP, 26). Love, again, is the motion of the soul, and for the mystic "the true end of . . . mystic life . . . is the supreme meeting between Lover and Beloved, between God and the soul."³ As we have seen, Roethke was unwilling to pursue the relationship between the self and God to completion, to Union, to loss of self-hood. But he believed in the soul and in the motion of the soul: "The human soul does not live, but is life, the life of the body" (SF, 143). And the life--the spirit, the soul--of the body is the propelling motion of love, which transforms the self into otherness, a stage of illumination. "All pleasurable and exalted states of mystic consciousness in which the sense of I-hood persists, in which

there is a loving and joyous relationship between the Absolute as object and the self as subject fall," Underhill tells us, "under the head of Illumination: which is really an enormous development of the intuitional life at high levels."⁴

Intuitional life is certainly seminal to Roethke's poetry and philosophy--"Act your heart. There's nothing else" (SF, 45). Feeling elicits knowledge: "We think by feeling. What is there to know?" (CP, 108). Because of this romantic stance, Roethke found himself the victim at times of derision: "I take it I am supposed to stand up for the intuitive man: a semi-articulate guinea pig, a Donatello baby constantly celebrating a marriage with the vast underworld of nature--all ear and no forehead" (Box 28, folder 26). Such over-simplification and misunderstanding of Roethke and his poetry is not, I suppose, surprising in light of Roethke's brusque dismissal of intellect ("Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys!" [CP, 92]). But his contention with reason is that it limits the self, restrains it from reaching spiritual transcendence, just as the body does.

The natural world, of course, is pure intuitional life, the truly primitive responding freely and unquestioningly to stimuli, to the worlds without and within them. Illumination brings the self to a level of consciousness where it too is in touch with both inner and outer reality. Aware of the separateness of all things, the self also comprehends the splendid oneness of All--a joyous revelation. Roethke

discusses this in the manuscripts:

"Evil is what makes for separateness" says Huxley. I think he is wrong here. For it is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other living things brings with it a corresponding feeling of the oneness of the universe. Plotinus says "For everyone hath all things in himself, and again and again sees all things in another, so that all things are everywhere and all is all and each is all, the glory is infinite." (Box 28, folder 26)

Infinite glory is what Roethke sings in "Once More, the Round":

"And everything comes to One, / As we dance on, dance on, dance on" (CP, 251). "One" is not God for Roethke. Unlike the orthodox mystic who continues his search for reality beyond the heightened consciousness of illumination, Roethke, after years of battling mental illness, rejected not the flesh, "The cloak of evil and despair" (CP, 19), that he tried to cast off as young poet, but the "dark, umbilical wisdom" (Box 32, notebook 11) of the unconscious, the abyss.

Of course, we cannot assume this rejection is complete and permanent just because this final poem of the posthumous volume⁵ which he arranged before his death is a summons to oneness of the universe. As we saw in the last chapter, in several poems he accepts the abyss ("Infirmity," "The Decision," "The Marrow"). And in a notebook (1948-49) he wrote, "Dear God, I want it all: the depths and the heights" (SF, 28).

Many years later he echoed that desire:

Now once for the living I sing and twice for the
dead,
And three times for that mad thing that rules the
world of my loose will
To be all and nothing at once.
(SF, 142)

His position was ever ambiguous: to know and not know; to see and not see; to be and not be. His poetry reflects his constant state of flux, his wavering on the edge. It is "Poetry made out of the long quarrel with oneself" (Box 72, folder 20).

What, finally, is Roethke's religious quest? First, we should redefine mysticism and then compare Roethke's and the mystic's quests. Underhill:

Mysticism . . . is not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge. On the one hand it is not merely the power of contemplating Eternity: on the other, it is not to be identified with any kind of religious queerness. It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. Or, if you like it better--for this means exactly the same thing--it is the art of establishing his conscious relation with the Absolute.

Roethke's quest is a conscious effort to apprehend creation and the Creator, to reach the glory of infinitude. His journey begins with the self and ends with the self: "All roads lead to the self" (SF, 123). One must establish his identity before he can have a relationship with another, even God. The problem of identity, however, is never wholly solved: "This valediction of the self, / What have I done to prove I am alive?" (SF, 122). And Roethke is ultimately unwilling to make the leap of faith--plunge into the abyss--that is requisite to Ultimate Union. God remains outside him: "God is all which is not me" (SF, 219). Allan Seager explains Roethke's position well: "He was a religious man but he was

not concerned with sin as might have been expected from his Presbyterian upbringing nor was he much interested in being his brother's keeper, although he performed many spontaneous kindnesses. Rather, he was troubled about the nature of God, not necessarily a Christian God, his own relation to Him, and his relationship to what he believed to be God's primary creation, nature."⁷

Roethke's God is as ambiguous as his desire, but his belief in a God is unquestionable. In December of 1962 he wrote: "I believe, and I believe absolutely, that we are in a crisis in history: and this is not because of the bomb but in spite of it. I am convinced that not the name, the aspect of God is changing--but the very nature of God is changing--and whether for better or worse I do not know" (Box 28, folder 26). God is never dead for Roethke. God--not the Godhead, the Absolute--is life; that is what he worships and adores. Hence his devotion to the small, the subhuman, and his tenacious grip on reality, on life.

Roethke had a genuine love of all creatures, and, like Blake, a belief in the power of love, in the transcendent nature of love. At one time he wrote, "Who loved his life can love his death as well" (SF, 117). Perhaps. Roethke tried. The Far Field, Roethke's last volume, is an anticipation of, at times a longing for, death. The poems and their arrangement reveal a deliberate finality. North American Sequence is brooding and contemplative. The Love Poems are less eas-

ily summarized, but they too are about death. "Her Time," for example, ends:

When everything--birds, men, dogs--
Runs to cover:
I'm one to follow,
To follow.

(CP, 210)

And in the last poem of this section, "Wish for a Young Wife," the protagonist appeals to his wife to live "Without hate, without grief, / When I am undone, / When I am no one" (CP, 217). Mixed Sequence includes poems as varied as "The Abyss," "The Geranium," and "The Pike." "The Abyss" concerns the death of the physical self, of the temporal. "The Geranium" is an ironic and touching poem about the death of a friend, the geranium. "The Pike" focuses on predation and the explosiveness of death, the violence of nature. Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical delves into the abyss, but ends on a note of triumph and illumination, of glorious oneness. Like the earlier sequences, The Lost Son, Praise to the End!, The Dying Man, and Meditations of an Old Woman, the sequences in The Far Field spiral out of the dark into the light as they go backward to move forward, down to push up. The motion is from temporal to spiritual, and the new level of awareness is real. For these reasons, I believe Roethke, master of mire and roots and darkness, when he says, "In spite of all the muck and welter, the dark, the dreck of these poems, I count myself among the happy poets" (SP, 40). Also, though Roethke was under the constant threat of manic depression, he felt a certain control

of his life, a certain direction that he had chosen for himself. Thus he wrote:

Each act of life is final and inevitably produces its consequences [of expiation through suffering] in spite of all the weeping and gnashing of teeth and the sorrow of weak souls who suffer as fright grips them when confronted with the results of their own actions. As for myself, I shall never need to be consoled for any act of my life, and this is because I am strong enough to judge my conscience rather than be its slave, as the orthodox would like to persuade us to be. (The brackets are Roethke's.) (Box 28, folder 26)

Acknowledging his unorthodoxy, following the course of mysticism his own way, not as a blind convert but as a poet and lover of life, Roethke emerges as a major force in American poetry. He once wrote: "I want to write a type poetry that is beyond anybody's experience. . . . Art is a sort of entertainment--I want to make it a good entertainment" (Box 35, notebook 60). He does. He takes us back to the primitive, the complexly simple--"What is harder than the simple[?]" (Box 35, notebook 60)--and leads us in a celebration of life: "I think of myself as a poet of love, a poet of praise. And I wish to be read aloud" (SP, 60). According to one astute critic (an unnamed reviewer), Roethke wanted more than this. After attending one of Roethke's readings in Seattle this critic asked: "Could they [the audience] hear Roethke saying, 'My poems were written in blood and sweat and anguish. How many of you can understand that? I have spent the torments of a life working free of the libidinous muck of worm and bat and lust to a ringing vision of God. How can anyone who has

lived safely, suffered less, know this terror--or this joy? It's too hard, too much to ask. So all right. If you can't love my poems, love me."⁸ Doubtlessly Roethke wanted desperately to be loved by readers, audiences, other poets, and friends alike. Love was his message and his metier. Of himself he once facetiously wrote: "A lovely man and you know it. His prose would kill you, but, face to face, he speaks straight to the spirit. A real source of life" (SP, 102). All joking aside, he is absolutely right, as his poetry affirms. James Dickey says it best:

There is no poetry anywhere that is so valuably conscious of the human body as Roethke's; no poetry that can place the body in an environment--wind, seascape, greenhouse, forest, desert, mountainside, among animals or insects or stones--so vividly and evocatively, waking unheard of exchanges between the place and human responsiveness at its most creative. He more than any other is a poet of pure being. He is a great poet not because he tells you how it is with him--as, for example, the "confessional" poets endlessly do--but how it can be with you. When you read him, you realize with a great surge of astonishment and joy that, truly, you are not yet dead.

Roethke's poetry and therein his religious quest is a pursuit of life--of creation and God ("How terrible the need for God" [SF, 153])--via the self that tells us, finally, that life is not something to analyze and intellectualize, but something to feel, to celebrate, to love. His poetry sings in awe and joyous adoration of the wonder and mystery of All.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

¹ Box 35, notebook 54. The notebooks are part of the Roethke Collection at the University of Washington Suzzallo Library, Seattle. For further description see Appendix. Hereafter cited in the text.

² On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle, 1965), p. 19. Hereafter cited in the text as SP.

³ Box 65, folders 11, 12, 15, Teaching: Poetic Technique; Box 72, folder 13, Teaching: Notes. These papers are part of the Roethke Collection at the University of Washington Suzzallo Library, Seattle. For further description see Appendix. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness (London, 1911; rpt. 12th ed. 1960), pp. 30-1. Also see Appendix, pp. 187-192.

⁵ Underhill, p. 96.

⁶ The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (New York, 1966), p. 3. Hereafter cited in the text as CP.

⁷ Underhill, p. 85.

⁸ Underhill, p. 89.

⁹ Underhill, p. 99.

¹⁰ Underhill, p. 101.

¹¹ Raymond Bernard Blakney, ed., Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation (New York, 1957), p. xx.

¹² The Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle, 1968), p. 145. Hereafter cited in the text as SL.

¹³ Rosemary Sullivan, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master (Seattle, 1975), p. 126.

¹⁴ Box 28, folder 26, Literary Manuscripts: Prose. These papers are part of the Roethke Collection at the University of Washington Suzzallo Library, Seattle. For further description see Appendix.

¹⁵ Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York, 1968), p. 91.

¹⁶ Seager, p. 96.

¹⁷ Seager, p. 101.

¹⁸ Seager, p. 101.

¹⁹ Seager, p. 147.

²⁰ Seager, pp. 105-06.

²¹ Seager, p. 106.

²² Seager, p. 106.

²³ Seager, p. 109.

²⁴ Seager, p. 109.

²⁵ Seager, p. 109.

²⁶ Seager, p. 109.

²⁷ Alexander Hutchison, The Context of Illumination in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke (diss. Northwestern Univer-

²⁸ My view of Roethke's poetry, and therein his religious quest, is not essentially a new one. My concerns--the collective self, the fatherless child, literary ancestors, the unconscious, 'madness, otherness, love, death, and oneness--are those of the many Roethke scholars and critics who have preceded me, indeed, of anyone attempting to come to terms with Roethke and his poetry. Naturally, each scholar/critic has his own particular perspective, his own area of emphasis. Eleven books and pamphlets have been published about Roethke and his poetry, each contributing to an understanding of a not easily understood poet.

The first publication of some length is Ralph J. Mills, Jr's Theodore Roethke, published by the University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers in 1963. In it Mills places Roethke alongside his contemporaries--Randall Jarrell, Robert

Lowell, John Frederick Nims, Karl Shapiro, Richard Eberhart, and Richard Wilbur--and concludes that "Of all these later poets Theodore Roethke appears the most considerable, in terms of imaginative daring, stylistic achievement, richness of diction, variety and fullness of music, and unity of vision" (p. 6). Mills then supports this view, examining portions of several poems from, in chronological order to show the change, progression, and variety, Open House, The Lost Son and Other Poems, Praise to the End!, The Waking: Poems 1933-1953, Words for the Wind: The Collected Verse of Theodore Roethke, and I Am! Says the Lamb!, treating most of the themes mentioned above.

For my purposes, Mills' is the most important essay collected in Arnold Stein's Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry (1965). Herein are nine distinguished critics, each offering an essay that, in Stein's words, "represents the efforts of one gifted reader to explain his understanding of Roethke's achievement" (p. ix). The titles of the essays themselves bespeak their focusses and variety: "The Objective Ego" by Stephen Spender, "A Greenhouse Eden" by Louis L. Martz, "A Steady Storm of Correspondences: Theodore Roethke's Long Journey Out of the Self" by William Meredith, "The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle" by John Wain, "'That Anguish of Concreteness'--Theodore Roethke's Career" by W. D. Snodgrass, "Theodore Roethke: The Poetic Shape of Death" by Frederick J. Hoffman, "In the Way of Becoming: Roethke's Last Poems" by Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "Roethke's Broken Music" by Denis Donoghue, and "Theodore Roethke: The Power of Sympathy: by Roy Harvey Pearce. In his essay Mills presents the first analysis of Roethke's poetry in terms of mystical perception, and he enlists Evelyn Underhill, specifically her classic Mysticism, to define these terms (see particularly pages 119, 124, and 126). His discussion, as the title indicates, is of the poems in The Far Field, especially "North American Sequence" and "Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical," and his purpose is to reveal that these poems represent "an arduous but successful quest for mystical illumination" (p. 115) and are some of "the most astonishing mystical poems in the language" (p. 135). Surely Mills is right on both counts, and this essay has been the catalyst for further study of Roethke's mystical perspective.

In the first book-length study of Roethke's work, Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (1966), Karl Malkoff touches upon mystical visions in Roethke's poems, particularly "Meditations of an Old Woman," and he too credits Underhill's Mysticism with the probable forming of Roethke's mystical thinking, adding further credence by noting that "Stanley Kunitz also has suggested (in conversation) that Roethke got much of his material on mysticism from this source" (p. 168). Beyond this, Malkoff's book is important for its comprehensive treatment of the themes and patterns that persist throughout Roethke's poetry--self, childhood, love, death, madness, and so forth. Certainly it is a work

all subsequent critics have read and confronted--sometimes attacked. Tracing the chronology of Roethke's poems, Malkoff attempts to "evaluate" them and Roethke. His conclusion perhaps best reveals the somewhat vulnerable position he finds himself in as the first critic to try and deal with all the poetry: "It is already clear that while he [Roethke] has not the truly great stature of, say, Yeats, he is an important poet, perhaps a major one. . . . However he is judged, he will remain a rewarding poet to read, a human poet in an age that threatens to turn man into an object" (p. 225).

Also published in 1966, William J. Martz' The Achievement of Theodore Roethke is a slim work concentrating on Roethke's style, which Martz sees as a "journey into the interior"--an intense, internal, paradoxical, erotic sojourn that "teaches us how to feel," and therein distinguishes Roethke as a major American poet.

In 1968 Allan Seager published his biography of Roethke, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke. A captivating study, Seager threads together Roethke's struggles with himself, life, and poetry, convincing us as he does so of the high price that so often accompanies artistic genius.

Seager, a novelist, is the only non-poet to offer his view of Roethke in the essays compiled by William Heyen in Profile of Theodore Roethke (1971). These eight exceptional essays include Kenneth Burke's "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke," Stanley Kunitz' "Roethke: Poet of Transformations," and Heyen's own essay, "The Divine Abyss: Theodore Roethke's Mysticism." Heyen's essay is, as expected, the most central to my study. Heyen again emphasizes Evelyn Underhill's influence on Roethke: "There is much evidence that Roethke was drawn to Underhill's brilliant study [Mysticism], that to a large extent this book shed light on his personal experiences and shaped his poetic conception of mysticism. No doubt he heard news of himself often in this study, news of the pain that is necessary for mystical insight, of the 'agonizing periods of impotence and depression, for each violent outburst of creative energy' (Underhill, 383). . . . But, more significant, the phrasings and thematic directions of many of Roethke's later poems indicate that he digested and profited from Underhill's study. . . . for Roethke, Underhill was a means to a formal understanding of the mystical tradition" (p. 101). Heyen then applies Underhill's description of the five steps of the Mystic Way to Roethke's five part poem "The Abyss." While I disagree with some of this application (see pages 137-41 of this dissertation), Heyen's essay is excellent and prompted my study of Roethke's poetry in light of Underhill's seminal work.

Conversely, Nathan A. Scott, Jr.'s The Wild Prayer of Longing: Poetry and the Sacred, also published in 1971, rejects a mystical reading of Roethke's poetry: "His poetry . . . is to be found speaking only very rarely of God, and never in the

accents of any sort of mystical religion. He was a man who had no desire to transcend the finites and definites that make up the common occasions of life; his poetry is uninfluenced by any great lust for infinities and eternities" (p. 102). Scott is right and wrong here, for Roethke is surely influenced by desires to transcend earthly reality, like the mystic, while simultaneously celebrating even the most minute and seemingly insignificant of earthly creations--slugs, bacteria, snails, and the like. Perhaps more than any other poet, as William J. Martz puts it, "Roethke wants to be both in life and out of it at the same time" (The Achievement of Theodore Roethke, p. 3). But Scott's real focus is not on Roethke. His book is an effort to understand "the nature of reality that can be counted on finally to sanctify human existence" (p. xiv). He has chosen Roethke as an example of a poet who has a "sacramental apprehension of the things and events of human life" (p. 78). By this he means that Roethke's poetry demonstrates that Being is an archetypal mode of imagining, and that Roethke's singing of the joy of Being is sacramental. This is a remarkable work, and certainly Roethke's poetry is a sanctification of existence, human and otherwise.

Though Richard Allen Blessing does not use terms such as "sacramental" and "sanctifying," his Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision, a study of the energy and vitality of Roethke's poetry, is closely aligned to Scott's view. Blessing's attention, however, is given to Roethke's style, the manner in which he celebrates existence--rhymes, rhythms, sounds, puns, repetition, paradox, imagery, and the rest.

Rosemary Sullivan's 1975 volume, Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master, is a thorough examination of nearly every aspect of Roethke's work, with notable emphasis on mysticism. Drawing support from Roethke's notebooks, she confirms Mills', Malkoff's, and Heyen's earlier suggestion of Evelyn Underhill's influence on Roethke (see pages 126-28). She traces various threads of this influence through Roethke's later poems, beginning with, as Malkoff does, "Meditations of an Old Woman." Her work has been especially helpful in pointing the way for my own exploration.

Jenijoy La Belle's The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke (1976) is interested in influences of another sort--ancestors. Her fine book reveals the many voices that echo in Roethke's poems--from Thomas Traherne to Christopher Smart to Blake to Yeats and Eliot. She details what most readers sense, that Roethke was, in the words he chose for his good friend W. H. Auden, "a real magpie, with a cormorant's rapacity and the long memory of the elephant" (SP, 67). Still, she emphasizes that Roethke's is a distinctive and individual poetry, that his voice is, finally, his own.

The most recently published book on Roethke is Harry Williams' "The Edge Is What I Have" (1977). Williams concentrates on the long poems--"The Lost Son," "Meditations of an Old Woman," and "North American Sequence"--on the journey out

of the self. From these poems he establishes what he calls the Roethkean mode: the I as archetypal seer, the use of personal history, the long lines supported by sound patterns, the oracular voice. He then discusses Roethke's influence on five contemporary poets--James Wright, Robert Bly, James Dickey, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes. It is a useful study.

Two other works deserve mention here because of their, like my, pursuit of the influence of mysticism on Roethke's poetic perspective. They are the dissertations of Alexander Norman Hutchison and Larry Neal Bowers: The Context of Illumination in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke (1975) and Mysticism in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke (1976). Hutchison shows how Roethke's "effort to describe the nature of illumination--that is, the authentic relationship between the personal and the divine" (p. 2) unifies the poetry. Hutchison, too, turns to Evelyn Underhill's Mysticism, due particularly to the fact that Roethke makes so many references to her work throughout the notebooks. He lists citations that are made from 1942 through 1962, and notes that "the most extensive notes were made in 1957" (p. 17). Hutchison's study focusses on the emerging self as it shifts from self-involvement to the self-world, as it searches childhood for "essential motives," and as it turns to love--the anima. Also relying on Underhill, Bowers focusses on the major metaphors that Roethke uses, metaphors that are drawn from the mystical quest as presented in Mysticism--the outward journey, inward growth, the lovers, and approaching death and union. These are both enlightening works. Certainly I agree with Hutchison, as my study here attests, that illumination is central to Roethke's poetic and philosophic vision. I agree with Bowers' belief, as well, that Roethke deliberately borrowed the metaphors of the mystic quest in his own poetic search for identity. I disagree, however, with Bowers' conclusion that Roethke's search is finally a failure because he does not achieve ultimate union with God. As I show in this dissertation, Roethke rejects the notion of ultimate union and chooses the realm of illumination, chooses to celebrate life not death, chooses to sing of eternity in the present not the hereafter. That is Roethke's religious quest, and his poetry expresses and verifies the achievement of that quest.

Though my work covers much of the same ground as these and other critics, with the support of Roethke's notes and manuscripts I have tried to clarify Roethke's lifelong search for understanding of self and world and God, a search that finds inception, growth, and culmination in his poetry.

AWAKENING THE UNCONSCIOUS SELF

¹ In 1949 Roethke wrote to Kenneth Burke: "The poems

I still like in it [Open House] are: 'Interlude' p. 10 'Prayer' p. 13 'The Adamant' p. 16 'The Heron' p. 28 'The Bat' (as a child's poem) 'On the Road to Woodlawn' p. 42 'Academic' p. 45 'For an Amorous Lady' (of its kind) p. 46 'Vernal Sentiment' 'Night Journey.' Maybe: 'Epidermal Macabre' for that veil image" (SL, 160-61).

² Reviews by Louise Bogan, Babette Deutsch, and Robert Fitzgerald, as well as Seager's own assessment, are reprinted in Allan Seager's The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York, 1968), pp. 157-59. In addition, Stephen Spender says of "Big Wind," "My Papa's Waltz," "Child on Top of a Greenhouse," and "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz," "If Roethke had written nothing else, these poems, outstanding in any anthology of contemporary verse, would have made his name" ("The Objective Ego," p. 12). Louis L. Martz calls The Lost Son "a volume of great beauty, in its individual poems, in its ordering, its development, even in the fine pastel-drawing by Charles Seide that graces the jacket." Further, he concludes: "Roethke never surpassed the achievement of The Lost Son, though many of his later poems are filled to the same brim. In these green images Roethke reached the center of his memory and found his wholly individual idiom" ("A Greenhouse Eden," pp. 22-23, & 35). William Meredith rejoins: "It [The Lost Son and Other Poems] projects unmistakably the character of an original poet" ("A Steady Storm of Correspondences," p. 40). John Wain is even more enthusiastic: "It [The Lost Son] is a wonderful sequence: I would say that it marked a point of Roethke's emergence, from a gifted minor poet among gifted minor poets, into a poet of the first importance with something absolutely individual to communicate" ("The Monocle of My Sea-Faced Uncle," p. 61). Frederick J. Hoffman adds: "From the second volume (The Lost Son) on, Roethke made his verse his own, inscribed it with the signature of his inimitable temperament and fancy" ("Theodore Roethke: The Poetic Shape of Death," p. 95). These essays are contained in Arnold Stein's Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry (Seattle, 1965). Moreover, the following essays, collected in Profile of Theodore Roethke (Columbus, Ohio, 1971), compiled by William Heyen, are equally affirmative. Stanley Kunitz reiterates in 1967: "What I wrote in the magazine, Poetry, about The Lost Son, on its publication in 1948--this is a book of his that I continue to think of as a great one, or at least the central great one--still sounds pertinent to me. 'The ferocity of Roethke's imagination makes most contemporary poetry seem pale and tepid in contrast. Even the wit is murderous. What Roethke brings us is news of the root, of the minimum, of the primordial. The sub-human is given tongue and the tongue proclaims the agony of coming alive. The painful miracle of growth.'" ("An Evening with Ted Roethke," p. 14). Jerome Mazzaro comments that "particularly in The Lost Son, Roethke was able with such energy to achieve a voice, a rhyme, a line, a poem that re-

directed and enlivened American letters" ("Theodore Roethke and the Failures of Language," p. 64). Finally, Kenneth Burke's thorough examination of The Lost Son and Other Poems in "The Vegetal Radicalism of Theodore Roethke" confirms the achievement and status Roethke gained at once with this remarkable volume (pp. 18-46).

³ Carl G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul (New York, 1933), pp. 156-57.

⁴ Stanley Kunitz, "Roethke: Poet of Transformations," Profile of Theodore Roethke, ed. William Heyen (Columbus, Ohio, 1971), p. 71.

⁵ Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York, 1968), pp. 144-45.

⁶ Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness (New York, 1911; rpt. 1930), see "Mysticism and Symbolism," pp. 125-36.

⁷ Underhill, p. 169.

⁸ Underhill, p. 169.

⁹ Underhill, p. 169.

¹⁰ Underhill, p. 123.

¹¹ Underhill, p. 233.

¹² Underhill, p. 232.

¹³ For further references of the remaining titles in this volume and a thorough study of Roethke's literary ancestors, see Jenijoy La Belle's fine book, The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke (Princeton, 1976).

¹⁴ Underhill, p. 264.

¹⁵ Underhill, p. 123.

¹⁶ While it has not been my intention to focus on Roethke's literary ancestors, the influences of Whitman and Eliot on North American Sequence deserve some mention. Certainly both poets are recognizable throughout Roethke's work (see especially "Meditations," pp. 126-40, and "A Storm of Correspondences," pp. 149-59, in Jenijoy La Belle's The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke [Princeton, 1976]), but nowhere are they more important than in this final volume, this final journey. The journey itself calls forth Whitman, that great and perpetual traveller whose Leaves of Grass is the starting point for all poets who have journeyed since. Romantic, or-

ganic, the all-encompassing, mystical "Song of Myself," with its catalogues and long, end-stopped lines, its free verse and rhythmic, concatenating repetition, has perhaps no greater progeny than Roethke's sequence poems. Moreover, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" echo most clearly in North American Sequence, where the protagonist, perched on a rock facing the sea "Where the fresh and salt waters meet" (CP, 196), finds all, oneness ("I rock with the motion of morning; / In the cradle of all that is" [CP, 191]) in the embrace of that eternal mother Whitman immortalized so beautifully. Eliot, too, heard the strains of Whitman's poetry (Roethke: "Whitman, who influenced Eliot plenty [Roethke's italics], technically . . . --and Eliot, as far as I know, has never acknowledged this--" [SL, 230]; see also S. Musgrove's T. S. Eliot and Walt Whitman [Wellington, New Zealand, 1952]), particularly when he wrote Four Quartets, a culminating work with vibrations that are felt in North American Sequence, in Roethke's masterful and regenerative orchestration of the corporal and the spiritual, of life and death, of time past, present, and future, of endings in beginnings and beginnings in endings.

¹⁷ Kunitz, p. 67.

AWAKENING TO THE LOVE OF OTHERNESS

¹ William J. Martz, The Achievement of Theodore Roethke (Glenview, Illinois, 1966), p. 3.

² Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York, 1968), p. 144.

³ Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness (New York, 1911; rpt. 1930), p. 234.

⁴ Underhill, p. 133.

⁵ Underhill, p. 89.

⁶ Underhill, p. 77.

⁷ Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke 1943-1963, ed. David Wagoner (New York, 1972), p. 97. Hereafter cited in the text as SF.

⁸ Underhill, p. 191.

⁹ Underhill, p. 262.

¹⁰ Underhill, p. 122

¹¹ Underhill, p. 264.

¹² Underhill, p. 113.

¹³ Underhill, p. 97.

¹⁴ Recently I had the opportunity of talking with Charlotte Wilbur (Mrs. Richard Wilbur), who was a good friend of Roethke's. She told me numerous stories about him, but I was most interested in learning of the effect dancing had upon him. She said that often at parties or social gatherings Roethke would drink too much and become pugnacious, raising his fists and inviting a fight. However, if someone put a jazz record (usually Bix Beiderbecke, Red Nichols, or another of Roethke's favorites) on the phonograph and she, or any of the other women present, asked him to dance, he was transformed. Suddenly, according to Mrs. Wilbur, he would smile, unclench his fists, and dance with great gaiety, forgetting, at least apparently so, whatever had been angering him. She added that he was a wonderful dancer, very light on his feet for such a large man (six feet two, two hundred pounds).

¹⁵ Seager, p. 144.

¹⁶ Underhill, p. 389.

¹⁷ James McMichael, "The Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Profile of Theodore Roethke, compiled by William Heyen (Columbus, Ohio, 1971), p. 83.

¹⁸ Underhill, p. 117.

¹⁹ Underhill, p. 117.

²⁰ Underhill, p. 117.

ONENESS

¹ Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness (New York, 1930), p. 41.

² Underhill, p. 97.

³ Underhill, p. 99.

⁴ Underhill, p. 99.

- 5 Underhill, p. 246.
- 6 Underhill, p. 36.
- 7 John Vernon, The Garden and the Map: Schizophrenia in Twentieth Century Literature and Culture (Chicago, 1973), p. 158.
- 8 Underhill, p. 130.
- 9 Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York, 1966), p. 139.
- 10 Underhill, p. 83.
- 11 Underhill, p. 330.
- 12 A. L. Herman, The Bhagavad Gita: A Translation and Critical Commentary (Springfield, Illinois, 1973), p. 21.
- 13 Underhill, p. 53.
- 14 Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York, 1968), p. 168.
- 15 Seager, p. 223
- 16 Seager (from an undated notebook), p. 168.
- 17 Underhill, p. 332.
- 18 Underhill, p. 335.
- 19 Underhill, p. 73.
- 20 William Heyen, "The Divine Abyss: Theodore Roethke's Mysticism," Profile of Theodore Roethke, compiled by William Heyen (Columbus, Ohio, 1971), pp. 100-16.
- 21 Underhill, p. 100.
- 22 Theodore Roethke, "On 'In a Dark Time,'" The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston, 1964), p. 49.
- 23 See Stanley Kunitz's and John Crowe Ransom's "On Theodore Roethke's 'In a Dark Time'" (separate essays), The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston, 1964), pp. 41-48.
- 24 Babette Deutsch, "On 'In a Dark Time,'" The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston, 1964), p. 40.

- 25 Roethke, p. 49.
- 26 Roethke, p. 49.
- 27 Roethke, p. 53.
- 28 Underhill, pp. 346 and following.
- 29 Roethke, p. 49.
- 30 Dylan Thomas, Collected Poems (New York, 1953), p.
128.
- 31 Underhill, p. 41.
- 32 Underhill, pp. 169-70.
- 33 Underhill, p. 170.

CONCLUSION

¹ Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness (New York, 1930), p. 348.

² Underhill, p. 7.

³ Underhill, p. 307.

⁴ Underhill, p. 234.

⁵ Interestingly enough, in an unpublished letter dated "14 March 1963," concerning a Guggenheim fellowship, Roethke wrote: "I feel strongly that, at this particular point, we need to keep taking stock of what we really are like as a nation, and to remain humble before the eye of history. I started such a sequence under a Ford grant, but the six longish pieces called 'North American Sequence' in the new book, Dance On, Dance On, Dance On all turned out to be affirmative. Now I want to explore the other side of the coin" (Box 17, folder 29). The book, of course, was published as The Far Field. It is significant that Roethke originally intended a more negative outlook in North American Sequence and a more positive and vibrant title for the volume.

⁶ Underhill, p. 81.

⁷ Allan Seager, The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke (New York, 1968), p. 225.

⁸ Seager, p. 281.

⁹ James Dickey, "The Greatest American Poet," Atlantic
222 (November 1968), p. 56.

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APPENDIX

The Roethke Collection at the Suzzallo Library, the University of Washington, Seattle, is an exciting resource for the student of Roethke's work. Several writers and critics have given us some indication of the materials in the Collection. Allan Seager, for example, in The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke, devotes a number of pages to Roethke's notebooks, citing passages at some length. In a more thorough presentation and arrangement, Straw for the Fire, David Wagoner has deftly compiled material from the notebooks spanning twenty years, 1943-1963. In his introduction to these hitherto unpublished materials Wagoner provides a general description of the 277 notebooks, "most of them spiral notebooks--full of a miscellany of fragments of poetry, aphorism, jokes, memos, journal entries, random phrases, bits of dialogue, literary and philosophical commentary, rough drafts of whole poems, quotations, etc., and 8306 loose sheets . . ." (p. 9). His continued summation of the notebooks is well-detailed and enlightening, and Straw for the Fire presents us with a valuable sampling of the notebooks themselves. In addition, in Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke Ralph J. Mills offers an informative discussion

and first rate representation of Roethke's letters that are contained in the Collection. Aside from these works, however, little if any mention has been made of the remainder of the Collection, which is also vast, rich, and informative, as I hope to demonstrate here.

All the Roethke materials are carefully contained and arranged in gray manilla file boxes, 153 in all. The boxes and their contents are listed numerically in The Roethke Inventory, a quite comprehensive compilation and guide. For example, the first fifteen boxes contain incoming correspondence alphabetized in file folders; boxes 16 and 17 contain outgoing correspondence, which is continued in Addition VII, boxes 145 and 147-150; boxes 18-27 hold the literary manuscripts of the poems, boxes 27-28 the prose literary manuscripts; boxes 29-30 contain the literary manuscripts of other writers' works (such as poems by Rolfe Humphries and John Ciardi that were enclosed in letters to Roethke); box 31 contains criticism and reviews of Roethke's poetry; boxes 32-46 house the notebooks. Without belaboring the list, some of the other materials in the Collection are teaching notes, financial records, legal miscellany, ephemera, bulletins, pamphlets, catalogues, reprints of poems and conferences and symposia, a scrapbook, clippings, book lists, mailing lists, memorabilia, degrees and awards, tapes (recordings of Roethke reading his poetry), and general correspondence. As much as possible, all materials are dated.

There is, as well, a microfilm collection. Seventeen reels are devoted to the notebooks. Two reels are of books in Roethke's library, including a library film from his papers. There is also a reel of selections from books in his collection.

Inasmuch as most of the scholars (Allan Seager, David Wagoner, Richard Blessing, Rosemary Sullivan, and Jeni joy La-Belle come to mind) citing materials from the Roethke Collection have focused on the notebooks, I have given my attention to unpublished correspondence--Roethke's and, to a greater extent, the many poet friends with whom he corresponded (Rolfe Humphries, Stanley Kunitz, John Ciardi, Richard Wilbur, William Carlos Williams, Babette Deutsch, and others)--unpublished and/or uncollected poems, and, most notably, the prose manuscripts and teaching notes. I also have been entertained greatly by such personal memorabilia as Christmas cards, comical pen and ink sketches (mostly of birds) by Roethke, and photographs. Most of these items are contained in box 130. These materials have provided me, as they would anyone, with a more complete picture, a broader understanding, of Roethke--his relationships, interests, compulsions, eccentricities, insecurities, and humor.

I am not at liberty to reproduce the letters Roethke's poet friends wrote to him, but the relationships, the support and advice, the exchange of ideas, all are reflected by Roethke's own letters in Selected Letters. The prose manu-

scripts and the teaching notes, however, from which I have drawn heavily in this dissertation, I can and shall elaborate on. They are, for the most part, autograph copy in brown or green fountain pen ink. My fascination with these manuscripts rests both in their solid evidence of Roethke's serious study of, even preoccupation with, mysticism, and the sources of that study, and in their further substantiation of Roethke's complex and ambiguous nature.

Throughout this dissertation I have relied on Evelyn Underhill for definitions, illustrations, and a general clarification of mysticism, and, particularly and more importantly, of Roethke's mysticism. My justification for this is the numerous autograph pages of notes Roethke took directly from Underhill's Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness, first published in 1911. In box 65, for example, labelled Teaching, sub-series Poetic Technique, are three folders of consequence here. Folder 11 contains four autograph pages, one entitled, in Roethke's hand, "Mysticism & Theology," the title of Chapter V, pages 95-124, in Underhill's Mysticism. Moreover, this page of notes begins "Absorption into his body instead of concentration on an idea," a digestion, if not perfectly accurate paraphrase, of Underhill's words: "The Unconditioned Absolute, so soon as it alone becomes the object of their contemplation, is apt to be conceived merely as Divine Essence; the idea of Personality evaporates. The union of the soul with God is

then thought of in terms of absorption" (p. 120). The remaining pages in this folder, one untitled, the other two entitled "Magic" and "Mystic," also come from Mysticism, as paraphrase or direct quotation or a combination of the two. The following example is typical of the kind of notetaking found on these pages. On the page entitled "Mystic" Roethke has written:

Awakening of self: intense form of conversion: like sanctification (intense and permanent) From subject to an object now in void: Conversion is an unselfing.

Here is the passage from Mysticism, Part II, Chapter II, "The Awakening of the Self," which Roethke is clearly citing:

The awakening, from the psychological point of view, appears to be an intense form of the phenomenon of "conversion"; and closely akin to those deep and permanent conversions of the adult type which some religious psychologists call "sanctification." It is a disturbance of the equilibrium of the self, which results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower to higher levels, with a constant removal of the centre of interest from the subject to an object now brought into view: the necessary beginning of any process of transcendence.

. . .
"Conversion," says Starbuck, in words which are really far more descriptive of mystical awakening than of the revivalistic phenomena encouraged by American Protestantism, "is primarily an unselfing. . . ." (p. 76).

The rest of the notes in this folder can be documented from pages 81, 160, 162, 176, 178, 181, and 183 of Mysticism. Folder 12 contains a pad with nine autograph pages in pencil variously entitled "Mysticism," "Mysticism & Theology," "Immanence," or untitled. These titles again echo Underhill's, and the notes on these pages come from pages 85-118, Chapters

IV and V in Mysticism, "The Characteristics of Mysticism" and "Mysticism and Theology." Folder 15 holds a spiral notebook of which one page in fine, black, ballpoint ink begins "Magic = to get / Mysticism = to give." This and the remainder of the material on this page come from "The Characteristics of Mysticism," pages 70-75.

Box 72 comes, as well, under the heading Teaching, but the sub-series is Notes. Folder 13 of this box is titled "Mysticism" and contains ten autograph pages, some written in black ballpoint ink, some in pencil, some in dark fountain ink. These pages are less easy to document. Roethke seldom names his sources, although he usually puts quotation marks around material not his own. Some of the notes on these pages come from Mysticism, including quotations from Blake, Catherine of Siena, Meister Eckhart, Whitman, and St. Bernard. From the latter, for example, Roethke quotes, "Yet it has not come from within me, for it is good, and I know that in me dwelleth no good thing." This quotation is found on page 244 in Mysticism, in the chapter "Illumination of the Self." Indeed, there are two other pages of notes stemming from this chapter, and Roethke has carefully written and underlined at the top of the page the title of this chapter. But the quotation from St. Bernard is on a page Roethke has entitled "Mystic & Poet." This page of notes, a compilation of qualities shared by the mystic and the poet, commences,

Both contemplate object
Both are not passive: doesn't fall bewildered

"a selective surrender"
Both have a total operation of the mind & spirit:
a completeness

° . . °
Both have that character of "otherness"

None of this is directly quoted from Underhill, but surely, except for "'a selective surrender,'" these are the very attributes Underhill discusses at length throughout her book. A selective surrender is not, however, a trait Underhill would acknowledge as belonging to a true mystic. Time and again she reminds us that the final mystical step of union with God means that the self "surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely" (p. 170). Whether Roethke quotes "'a selective surrender'" from someone else, then, or even himself, I have been unable to determine. Certainly, pinpointing from where some of this material comes is difficult, if not impossible. Much of it, I would suggest, reflects Roethke's own ruminations; hence, the sources are perhaps inextricably enmeshed. But the foundation of most of these notes, as the interspersed quotes evidence, is Underhill's Mysticism.

The following page, entitled "Differences," seems again to be Roethke's own ideas based on his reading and experience: "1) The will plays a larger part in experience" and "3) Compulsive lover of attention." Such conclusions are found in Mysticism, but not in these exact words.

Another page, entitled "Mysticism," discusses Meister Eckhart ("intelligent mystic") and gives brief definitions of

Platonic realism, Aristotelian realism, and nominalism:

Platonic realism: universals are realities prior
to things

Aristotelian realism: universals are realities in
things

Nominalism: universals are mere names for particu-
lar things, not prior or in them, but after

Particular Things alone are real, (nomina name)

Universals are not essences of things but mere words

These simple definitions, and therein distinctions, could come from any number of sources or no one particular source. Again, nothing here is quoted directly from Underhill. Indeed, she does not, to my recollection, ever mention nominalism. But she does discuss realism, or as she calls it, Reality, thoroughly, especially in Chapters I, II, and IV, where she distinguishes many philosophies, including nihilism, vitalism, idealism, gnosticism, and the relationship of each to mystical thought. Realism or reality is, of course, central to mysticism, to mystical perception and apprehension. In her examination of emanence and immanence, two opposite views of reality, she clearly makes the distinction between Platonic and Aristotelian realism: "As every one is born a disciple of either Plato or Aristotle, so every human soul leans to one of these two ways of apprehending reality" (p. 130). As for Eckhart, he is a figure Underhill repeatedly discusses, quotes, and uses to exemplify numerous mystical propensities and beliefs, not the least of which is the difference between philosophers and philosophic mystics (Underhill separates philosophers from real mystics in that philosophers rely on diagrams, mystics on personal experience):

Also there are many instances of true mystics, such as Eckhart, who have philosophized upon their own experiences, greatly to the advantage of the world; and others--Plotinus is the most characteristic example--of Platonic philosophers who have passed far beyond the limits of their own philosophy, and abandoned the making of diagrams for an experience, however imperfect, of the reality at which these diagrams hint. (p. 83)

Underhill also finds Eckhart an "intelligent mystic," as her biographical sketch reveals:

the great Dominican scholar Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), who resembled Dante in his combination of mystical insight with intense intellectual power, and laid the foundations at once of German philosophy and German mysticism. (p. 463)

My point here is not to establish Underhill as the source of Roethke's notes on Eckhart and realism, but to show how rich and complex a resource Underhill's Mysticism is--how far and wide its reach, how inclusive its grasp. I would not presume to insist that all Roethke's knowledge of mysticism, other than his firsthand experience, came from Underhill's work. In fact, the notes Roethke wrote as he drafted his essay "On 'Identity,'" which I will discuss below, clearly indicate a close reading and interest in R. C. Zaehner's Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience. Roethke quotes the same passage from Oscar Wilde's The Soul of Man Under Socialism (see pp. 118-19 of this dissertation), about the true personality of man, that Zaehner quotes at least four times. Also Roethke's attendance to the muslims and sufis is undoubtedly drawn from Zaehner, but undoubtedly as well first was suggested to Roethke by

Underhill. Further, Zaehner's book was not published until 1957. Roethke's notebooks confirm that he was reading Underhill as early as 1936.

Of the remaining eight pages in this folder, five are very like the three discussed above, much of the material echoing and/or quoting Underhill. The other three pages are quite different, dealing with spirits and elements associated with witchcraft, alchemy, the underworld--angels, nymphs, monsters, salamanders, Styx, Lethe, fire, mist, and the like. Roethke seems here to be categorizing, mapping out, mythical and mystical regions. The sources of this material are uncertain. Across the top of the page Roethke has written "The World Within," but if this refers to Mary Louise Aswell's book by that title (a collection of short stories gathered together as representative of psychologically-centered fiction, such as Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." and Henry James' "The Beast in the Jungle") the relationship with what follows is oblique if, in fact, existent at all. Some of what does follow is this:

Principalities:
Angels inhabit the air
Nymphs & monsters: water

and,

Paracelsus { Salamanders = fire
Sylphs = air swiftness
Undines = water (slower grace and re-
fluent langours)
Pigmies & gnomes = earth (dwarf-like,
stunted, arrested energy)

stunted, arrested energy)

And in a diagonal slant across the bottom, righthand corner of the page:

The toad and the sylph
Went out one day,
A game of tennis
Themselves to play

Such notations and playful poetry shed little light on the main of Roethke's poetry, but they indicate the directions and extent of Roethke's fascination with, and desire to know more about, other realms of belief, of habitation. The sources for such ethereal and other worldly concerns probably include Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici and Urn Burial, Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, Dante's Divine Comedy, and Arthur Edward Waite's two volume study of The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of . . . Paracelsus the Great. (Browne, Dante, and Paracelsus are discussed in Underhill's Mysticism.)

Aside from the Teaching Notes, the materials which have been most helpful in this study are located in box 28, Literary Manuscripts: Prose, folders 26-28, titled "Northwestern University Symposium on Identity." Folder 26 contains fifty-nine pages of autograph notes. Folder 27 holds an autograph draft of the essay, and folder 28 a typed draft, both with revisions by Roethke. This symposium presentation was later published as Roethke's well-known essay "On 'Identity.'" The Roethke Inventory dates this material 1963, but, in fact, several pages of the notes in folder 26 are dated by Roethke December, 1962. The order of these pages is un-

certain. Some of them are naturally sequential, others not. The ink and handwriting vary considerably, indicating that these notes probably were made over a period of some time, and perhaps suggesting different states of mind and/or body. The content of these notes is also various, running the gamut from self to poetic to mystical (both eastern and western) analysis. Since the subject is identity, the search revealed in these pages--the ideas, philosophies, religions that Roethke probes--is invaluable. Certainly, it is enlightening, even surprising, to see the concerns, the influences, the focal points Roethke considers, weighs, discards, and pursues as he grapples with the question of identity. While I have quoted extensively from these notes throughout the dissertation, the following are disturbing ponderings, statements, poems, yearnings that, with one or two exceptions, have not been mentioned previously (those requoted here show the juxtaposition of Roethke's ideas; I have used four spaces to indicate where one page of notes ends and another begins):

It would be rather easy for me to start posturing about myself ["my" is scratched through] and poetry, to assume the clown's role,--I'm not ripe enough to be Lear's fool--to laugh at one's spiritual absurdities and crudities. This I do not propose to do.

I'm more and more sure about less & less.
Creativity
The self
"Madness"

It's a sad fact that today more people seem to be interested in the poetic process than in poetry. How poems are made, how a poet commences being a poet, how he exists--what he eats, and so on--all this . . .

The archetypes are modified, given form by the individual.

The reaction is not to reflect, but to obey:

'He who tries to rise above reason falls outside of it,' said Plotinus

Naked & unashamed
Where neither day nor night is,
That we hold dear,
A whistling world

Dear to me the tremors of flowers
At the passing of feet;
The weeds dying into themselves
The light made its own dark:
Flame, like a curtain, played
Is it the God in me says that today

"Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact"

a fine bitter poem

Single vision: (°) Newton

This horror at my limits

I have become what I see

Vague titillations out of a half-world

The Heightened consciousness under ethical control, artistic and ethical

Pride separates man from man, and separates the conscious ego.

To drag the shadow forth

Rama Krishna: 'I wish to feed everyone.'

of nature mystics: "they rarely mention God except as a description of their expanded selves."

Sense of personality expanding & actually seeking

God is

Not to chain but train the manic

Sufism degenerated: the mania at all cost

Existentialism: "It is not the invention of a Bohemian philosophy or of a narrative novelist; it is not a sensationalist exaggeration made for the sake of profit and fame; it is not a morbid play with negativities"

An effort to return to the meaning of a spiritual center

Implies that there is something buried in the work that should or could be revealed in another way

There are two assumptions rampant: that we have lost God: indeed lost him from the 19th C.; or we are far from him. Neither do I believe. A particular generation

Sartre's freedom to change which he so vehemently insists on seems to me irresponsible rather than heroic. He wants the emptiness of despair: he gets it.

The barnyard mystic unlike the usual, is not a highly verbal type

In the search without observance when the
cedars hold back the rain,
The sheen on the dolphin's back, rising
in the shimmering harbor,

Accustomed as I am to public speaking, I am not accustomed to public thinking

I lost my fear of death before that grave:

Why poetry? because it's language at its best,
at its highest or sharpest, or most acute or most
honest--and farthest removed from the boring text-
book, the newspaper cliché, the dead hipster jargon.

The Vedantin: only One
The weeds angular and pure
Some mystics ascend to God by discursive
reasoning; others savour and experience it "Glory
be to me! How great is my glory
The muslim: all things perish except God's face

Brahman: the individual soul
[I know something more, and
something less than Lear's fool
In certain euphorias, one becomes virtually
all spirit--with little or none of the muddiness
and filth of the unconscious

Young as they are, they wish to be reborn
Humility or sense of awe
Muslim: not union but self-extinction
In ecstasy, one is conscious of God only & all
consciousness of self is obliterated
I grant existence is possible: here are all these
people digging into their grapefruits of a morning

The flesh danced, bone to bone,
She wound me ditty -- down

We have three distinguished thinkers, and one
feeler.

We think by feeling. What is there to know

These notes are, clearly, exciting, stimulating, and
the order, the flow--or lack of it--of Roethke's ideas and
thoughts is awesome, has a stream of consciousness quality
that allows us to marvel at his mind, his genius, his inter-
ests, his fears. They also invite additional research in a
number of areas, notably Roethke's relationship to eastern

mysticism, his symbology, existentialism, even poetic purpose.

The Roethke Collection is, then, a further revelation of the complexities of Roethke and his poetry, complexities that, like those of all great artists, are far-reaching and catalytic, and the materials in the Collection have definitely not been exhausted. The notebooks, the correspondence, the drafts of poems and lectures and essays, the notes, the memorabilia and ephemera, all are testimony that much remains to be learned about and from this remarkable poet.